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DASHING CHARLIE'S RIDE FOR THE FORT.

DASHING CHARLIE'S DEADSHOTS;

OR,

BLACK HORSE BILL'S VOW.

A STORY OF

The Mounted Tramp's Mission.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISGRACED CADET.

"THIS is terrible, Graham, that I, Prevost Preston, the descendant of an old and honorable family, should have fallen so low as to be driven in disgrace, as a thief, from this Academy—driven out in the wide and cruel world, a wanderer, an outcast, for with this stain upon me I dare not go home, dare not extend my hand to one who has known me in the past, to one who has been my fellow cadet here at West Point."

"You have brought your misfortune upon yourself, Preston, how, I do not know, cannot understand in one of your nature, yet the fact stands that you did so; but, for all that, old fellow, here I extend my hand and wish you success through life, while I regret that your bright prospects for the future have all been dashed to the ground by one act."

"Come, I am not ashamed to show my friendship for you still. I will go with you down to the boat, for I have already obtained leave to do so."

"Howard Graham, you are a noble man, and true as steel. The time may come when you may not be ashamed to own me as your friend."

"But, I will not put you to the test of facing my enemies, for such I now consider every man at the Point, except yourself."

"I go to the boat with you, Prevost Preston, so if you are ready I am. Let me carry one of your grips."

The two speakers were standing in a room in the Cadet Barracks at West Point.

One was in uniform, the other in the dress of a civilian, for he had just taken off his cadet gray, under a charge of "dishonorable conduct," and was branded by his fellows as "a thief," for the accusation that he had taken money belonging to others had been proven against him.

The two were splendid specimens of young manhood, perfect in physique, and their personal appearance had gained for them from their fellow cadets the title of the "Twin Apollos" of West Point.

In the disgrace that had fallen upon Prevost Preston, his chum, Howard Graham, had remained true as steel, and was one of the few who could afford to do so.

He was the idol of his comrades, as had been also Prevost Preston, and held the rank of captain of one of the companies, as his friend did of another, for they stood high up in their respective classes.

The two now left the room and started across the grounds toward the road leading down to the steamer landing.

Knots of cadets stood about the grounds, and the face of Prevost Preston flushed as he heard the distinct sound of a hiss, as they caught sight of him.

Then as the two passed on the hisses came in a perfect chorus, more oppressive than words of derision would have been.

Howard Graham felt that some of these signs of enmity were for him in disapproval of his course in still clinging to his friend now in disgrace.

But, he showed no signs of weakening. He slipped his hand into the arm of Preston and walked on.

As they passed a larger group of cadets, following a hiss came a groan loud and deep, in token of contempt and displeasure.

But, on the two went, and descending the road to the landing saw the steamer just coming in.

"Good-by, Preston! and again I say—success to you in life, for from to-day you start anew in your career. Good-by!"

Prevost Preston's hand grasped that of his brave fellow-cadet and wrung it with vise-like grip.

But not a word did he utter, for his heart was too full; he dared not trust himself to speak.

His silence and that strong grasp were more eloquent than any words could have been, and turning he walked quickly on the gang-plank and disappeared among those who were crowded upon the boat.

A few moments later, as the steamer swung off, Howard Graham saw him standing upon the deck astern, gazing sadly at the place where he had so long dwelt, a happy and honored cadet.

He caught the wave of his hand and said to himself:

"Poor, poor Preston! How sad the blow that has fallen upon him."

"Did his own lips not confess his guilt to me never would I believe that he had done a wrong."

"Ah, me! I fear he will go to the bad, now, for his heart seems broken and he will throw himself away."

"Now to return and face those whom I have offended by my act in showing sympathy and friendship for that poor fellow."

"It was the severest ordeal of my life, to pass through that storm of hisses, for many meant them for me; but I am ready to face the consequences," and as he reached the Academy grounds up to him stepped a fellow-cadet with extended hand while he said:

"Bravo, Graham! That was one of the bravest acts a man could do, and I uphold you in it, as many of the men also do."

And, with the words, a great weight was lifted from the heart of the handsome and gallant cadet captain.

CHAPTER II.

THE YOUNG GAMBLER.

UP and down the deck of the steamer paced the disgraced cadet, his brow dark, his eyes glaring and lips sternly set, as emotions crowded upon him that almost overwhelmed him.

People near glanced into his face and saw that he bore some grief, some pain so deep that it made him oblivious of their regard.

As the steamer swung off from a landing some miles below West Point, one of the deck hands working on the outer guard was struck by a swinging block and the blow knocked him into the river.

Loud rung the cries of "man overboard!"

They reached the ears of the disgraced cadet and he was awakened from his little reverie.

With a bound he was looking down from the steamer's deck and heard the words:

"He was stunned by the blow and cannot save himself."

A leap, and head-first went the young cadet like an arrow down into the foaming waters.

A few strong strokes carried him to the man who was drowning, a negro deck hand; and grasping him, he saw that he was conscious but so paralyzed by fright that he was unable to save himself.

Placing his arm about the man the brave youth sustained him, his head thus held above the waters while he swam toward the boat now hastening from the steamer, which had come to a standstill.

Such a shout as went up from those on the boat, and was echoed by the crowds on the wharf, must have gladdened the heart of the man whose life was under a cloud to which there was no silver lining for him.

But, he hastened to a state-room and, as quickly as he could, changed his wet clothing for dry, and once more went on deck.

Passengers pressed up to him by the score, praising his act and congratulating him upon his splendid courage; but he received all with a look of pain, while his smile was one of bitterness.

"The negro wishes to thank you, sir, and he cannot come on deck, for he is in the care of a doctor," said one of the officers of the boat approaching him.

Prevost Preston's face flushed but he answered:

"No, no! Tell him I cannot come, but say that I hope he will be all right soon."

"May I ask your name, sir?" asked a gentleman who had particularly noticed the youth before and after his brave act.

"My name?" and Prevost Preston started as though he had been struck a blow.

"Yes, sir, your name, for I am a newspaper man and wish to speak of your brave act in the papers."

"No! no! no! I do not wish it; I—I—have no name—now!" and the same look of anguish swept over his face that had rested upon it before he was lost in painful reverie.

"You certainly cannot object to such a daring act, the risk of your own life, to save that of a poor negro deck hand, being made public?" protested the surprised man of the press.

"But I do, sir, for it was not a daring act, as I swim like a fish, and had I lost my own life it would have been the best thing that could have happened to me. Good-afternoon, sir!" and the ex-cadet turned away.

But, newspaper men are not readily cast off and this one went to the captain of the boat and asked:

"A West Point cadet, called home, I take it, from his sad face, by bad news, for he has not his uniform on."

"But, he is a brave one, and when I thanked him made light of it."

"What is his name?"

"The purser said that he gave the name of Prevost Preston, sir."

The reporter wrote it down and the next morning his paper had a full account of the affair on the river, in which the rescuer was lauded to the skies.

The article, of course, was seen and read by the West Point cadets, along with what followed, for the man of the press had not lost sight of his hero when he landed in New York.

No, he saw a chance for a fine newspaper article, wished to know what the grief was that the youth was suffering under, and so followed

him to the hotel, and then, in his "enterprise," wired to West Point to know if aught could be told of Prevost Preston, cadet.

The answer which was returned was as follows:

"Prevost Preston, ex-cadet, was dismissed from Academy for robbing a fellow-cadet."

Then followed the balance of the article which had so interested the West-Pointers, and which read as follows:

"Having found in Prevost Preston, ex-cadet, a hero, I was startled to discover that he had been dismissed from the Academy for a crime which must tarnish his whole future life."

"That accounted for the look of anguish which at times I saw sweep over his handsome face, and then change to one of intense sadness."

"How the charges against him were proven I do not know, but I cannot be made to believe that a man with such a face, one who showed such intensely acute suffering, was guilty, as accused."

"Thus interested in him, I dogged his steps after his arrival in New York, all the more. He strolled into a theater, soon left it and dropped into a music hall."

"He did not drink, but would light a cigar, smoke it for a few minutes, and throw it away to light another."

"Then he entered a fashionable gambling-den and began to play."

"He played recklessly, but won from the first, turning from the table with ten thousand dollars in his pocket, yet the same bitter expression upon his face which I had before noted."

"It was nearly daylight when he left the gambling-saloon, and, returning to the hotel, he ordered his baggage and drove to the ferry, and upon the other side bought a ticket to the City of Mexico."

"What will the future of that disgraced young soldier be?"

CHAPTER III.

A TIMELY WARNING.

ONE pleasant spring afternoon, two years after the departure of the disgraced cadet from West point, a party was riding across a prairie on the far frontier, and making for a range of heavily timbered hills.

It was a military party, about a dozen in number, for there was General Wesley, a couple of staff officers, three ladies, and an escort of a sergeant and four cavalymen.

The scouts of Fort Advance having reported no signs of Indians being near, the balmy spring air had tempted the general to take a long ride, and all were dashing along at a canter when they suddenly heard the clatter of hoofs behind them and turning beheld a horseman coming at the full speed of the animal he rode and waving his hat as though to bring them to a halt.

"A courier from the fort, who has taken our trail and followed it," said the general, and the party came to a halt.

"I do not recognize him as one of the scouts from the fort, sir," said Captain DeLong, as the horseman came nearer.

"Nor do I," added Lieutenant Wainwright, the general's handsome aide-de-camp.

"He is splendidly mounted," said pretty Mrs. DeLong.

"And rides like a Texan," Miss Gabrielle Garland remarked, while Miss Viola Howland asked with a smile:

"And is that to imply that he rides well, Gabrielle?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly," was the *chic* response of Miss Garland, and then she added, as the horseman drew nearer:

"As handsome as a picture, too; he is—my beau ideal of a borderman."

The subject of their remarks and criticisms had now drawn very near to the halted party, but still came on with the speed of a deer.

He was mounted upon a long-bodied, clean-limbed horse as black as jet and full of fire.

His equipments were all Mexican, from the silver-mounted, long-horned saddle to the hair bridle, lariat and *serape* behind the cantel.

His dress was a picturesque one of high-top boots, Mexican spurs, fringed leggings of buckskin and a blue silk hunting shirt under the collar of which was knotted, sailor fashion, a black scarf.

About his waist was an embroidered belt in which were a pair of silver-mounted revolvers and a long bowie-knife, while a repeating-rifle hung at his back.

He wore a Mexican sombrero embroidered in silver, and a jacket was rolled up and tied behind his saddle.

It was hard to judge of his age, for he wore a long beard, and his hair fell in waving masses to his waist, but he was certainly not over twenty-five though he appeared older.

A very handsome man he was, even the men admitted this, and there was something in his face that stamped him as one of indomitable pluck and character.

He reined his horse in gracefully to a sudden halt, raised his sombrero with graceful courtesy to the ladies, and, with a military salute to the general, said in a voice deep and rich in tone:

"Pardon me, sir, but you are riding into a trap."

"Ah! and into what kind of a trap, my man?"

"The trail you are following, sir, will carry you into a canyon where a band of a hundred Sioux are ambushed and awaiting you, sir."

"Indeed? and how know you this?"
 "I was on their trail, sir, and noting that they were nearing the fort I flanked to reach there and give warning, when I spied, by mere accident, your going into the hills where the red-skins are encamped, so I at once came after you to warn you, general."

"Do you know me?"
 "No, sir."
 "How do you know me as a general, then?"
 "By the star on your saddle-housing, sir."
 "You are a keen observer, my man. Are you a soldier?"

"I am not, sir."
 "What are you?"
 "A Mounted Tramp, I may say, sir," and a look of pain crossed the man's face which all could not but observe.

"You are a frontier wanderer then?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "For what reason?"
 "I have no home, sir—no friends; I love this wild life and hence follow it."

"What is your name, my man?" asked the general, becoming more and more interested in this strange lone rider.

There was a slight hesitation before he answered.

Then came the reply:
 "Horner Rockwell, sir."

"Well, Mr. Rockwell, I thank you for your advice, but my scouts have reported no red-skins within fifty miles of the fort, so I can hardly believe that there can be a large band between us and the fort, now."

"Your scouts are mistaken, sir, and if you go on you will ride into an ambush."

"Then you advise returning through the range by the gap we came, six miles below?"

"No, sir, for the moment the red-skins see you turn about they will send a force to ambush you there, also."

"Then what can we do, may I ask, for those are the only two passes through the range that I know of."

"There is a secret pass, sir."

"Ah! I have heard of one now I recall it, but believe my chief of scouts, Dashing Charlie, alone knows of it of all the scouts at the fort."

"I know the secret pass, sir, and can lead you through it, but we would be ambushed there also, if the Indians saw us move toward it, though they do not know of its existence."

"According to your report then, Mr. Rockwell, we are in a very dangerous situation."

"You are, sir."

"If the Indians are in the range as you say, we are."

"Let me prove that they are there, sir, so that you will not doubt me," and the horseman with a word to his horse rode toward the range at a run.

The general and his party remained where they had halted and watched him draw nearer and nearer the range until, suddenly, he drew rein and wheeled about, while from the timber came a volley of shots and a shower of arrows after him.

"A timely rescue, indeed," said General Wesley, as he saw the deadly peril they had missed riding into.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS GUIDE.

THE faces of the three ladies paled, at sight of the danger they had avoided, and the officers and soldiers wore an anxious look, for they now fully realized what was before them.

They had taken a very long ride, going through one pass, and after a halt and lunch at a beautiful spring in a motte on the prairie, had started homeward by another gap in the range.

For many miles there was not another. Their horses had begun to feel the long ride; night was coming on and already would have fallen before they reached the fort had they continued on as they were going.

Now they comprehended how they had been saved by the mysterious man who had called himself a "Mounted Tramp."

He had dared venture near enough to the range to draw upon himself the fire of the ambushed Indians, for when he turned, as though discovering them, they had sent a volley upon him, as recorded.

Unhurt, he had wheeled and ridden back toward General Wesley and his party.

The red-skins did not follow, for they felt that they could bide their time, expecting the party to go to the other pass, where they could ambush them and take prisoners the entire party.

If they turned to ride back over the plains, or to seek another pass, then it would be time for them to dash out in pursuit, while others could follow the range and still guard the gaps.

As the horseman returned to the party, General Wesley extended his hand and said, frankly:

"I humbly ask your pardon, my friend, for my doubt of you; but we meet strange characters upon this border and are prone to be suspicious, while I could not understand how these Indians, without discovery, could have gotten between us and the fort."

"Do not ask my pardon, general, for I feel

that you had no reason to do otherwise than doubt me, sir."

"Well, you have saved the lives of all of us, I frankly admit, and now I ask you—what is to be done?"

"I can see but one thing to extricate you from the danger, sir."

"And what is that?"

"To delay here a while, sir, as though undecided what to do, and then start for the lower pass."

"Which you say they will ambush?"

"True, sir; but we will not go there."

"What then?"

"The delay will bring night on before you go very far, and as it is clouding up, it will be very dark and we can then turn off for the secret pass, muffle the hoofs of our horses, and I will guide you through that way to the fort."

"We are in your hands, Mr. Rockwell, and I need only say that your reward will be commensurate with your most valuable services."

"I neither seek nor will receive any reward, sir, for though a Mounted Tramp I am not a beggar on horseback," was the somewhat severe retort of the stranger.

"Pardon me! I meant only to act for your good, as you do for ours."

"I can understand that, sir, but my reward will consist in having done a proper and pleasant duty."

"Nobly said, sir," said Gabrielle Garland in a way that brought the gaze of the stranger quickly upon her, causing her face to flush, while Mrs. DeLong came to her rescue, with the remark:

"Yes, it is a pity that more of us do not seek our sole rewards in the fact of having done our duty."

"Well, Mr. Rockwell, we are in your hands, for you are our guide. We have no scout along, and you see our force."

And the general glanced at the sergeant and his men.

"Yes, sir; and did you get any idea of the force of the Indians by their firing upon me?"

"I supposed there must have been a score of shots, and Captain DeLong said as many as half a hundred arrows were fired."

"All of that, sir."

"It is remarkable that you were not wounded."

"I gauged my distance, sir, to halt just beyond range, though there were several bullets that came uncomfortably close."

"Now, sir, suppose we ride slowly on toward the other gap, for, see, the sun is near the horizon."

"Lead on, Mr. Rockwell."

The strange guide saluted and dashed to the front, at once drawing his horse down to a walk when he got position.

The general and Gabrielle Garland followed; Captain DeLong and Viola Howland came behind them, with Lieutenant Calvin Wainwright and Mrs. DeLong next, and the sergeant and his men bringing up the rear.

As the guide rode on ahead they all had an opportunity to note his splendid seat in the saddle and perfect form.

Turning suddenly he said, always with a military salute:

"Turn your glass upon the range, sir, and you will see the red-skins moving back in the timber, but they will still leave the pass guarded."

"Yes, I see them, and those who are retreating are going beyond the range to ride rapidly to the other gap."

"Yes, sir, that is it; but just as we get opposite to the secret gap it will be dark enough to ride toward the range."

A calm had fallen now upon the gay party, for one and all knew their peril.

They watched the sun go down beyond the range a mile away, and there was the thought, at least with some, of wonder if they would ever see it rise, if it was their last sunset on earth.

Gradually the form of the guide and his horse faded into shadow, and as he had said it would, the night came on very dark, black and threatening a storm.

At last the guide halted and said:

"Now, I will turn in for the secret pass, sir; so march well closed up. Let the sergeant and his men cut up their blankets in squares for mufflers for the hoofs of the horses, for they are shod and the trail is a rocky one."

"Strips of blanket will do to tie them on with," and when the general gave the order the stranger guide again led the way, now going toward the secret pass through the range.

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERIOUS DEPARTURE.

THE guide could not be seen ten steps ahead, so dark it had become, and those who followed him kept well closed up.

The range loomed up ahead, its blackness marked against the leaden sky, and only the thud of the horses' hoofs could be heard, for not a soul spoke.

At last the guide halted and said:

"Now, sir, we are at the place to enter the range, so it would be well to muffle the hoofs of the horses."

The sergeant and his men had torn or cut their blankets into square pieces and strips, and now dismounting, tied them securely about the hoofs of the horses.

The guide was offered some for his horse, but said that he had some he had used before and made of bearskin.

When all were ready the guide uncoiled his lariat, which was a very long one, and explained:

"Let each one grasp this, sir, and ride in single file, for we have some very dangerous places to pass, and a false step may be fatal to the one making it."

"There is so much need for caution then?" asked the general.

"Yes, sir; the greatest caution, as you would see if it was not so black along the trail."

"I have every confidence in you, so lead on, Rockwell, and we obey," the general responded, and turning he explained the situation to the others.

A stake-ropes was attached to the guide's lariat, to make it long enough to reach from the horn of his saddle back to the hand of the soldier who brought up the rear, and then, forming in single file the march had begun.

The guide had suggested that the sergeant and his men follow him, leaving the general, the ladies, and the officers behind, as he said in case they were fired upon by red-skins the latter would not get the full force of it.

But the ladies said they wished to keep near the front, so the order of march was continued as before.

Entering the pass they found that they were in such total darkness that but for the connecting lariat they would never have known that any one was in advance or behind them.

There was no sound of hoofs upon the rocky trail; not a word was spoken, and the silence and gloom about them were depressing in the extreme.

Yet all held the greatest confidence in the unknown man at their head.

He was leading them surely along, but how and where?

In that blackness how could he see?

A breath of cold, damp air fanned their faces on one side, coming upward, and all understood that they were upon the edge of a precipice, and the movements of their horses told them that the animals knew their danger, but blindly followed their leaders, the ebon steed and his mysterious rider on the lead.

Each and all congratulated themselves upon having that lariat life-line as a guide, yet they could not comprehend how the stranger who led them went on so unerringly on his way.

Up and up they climbed, going at one moment on a level track, then over a rough trail until at last they began the descent of the range.

The rocky road would have given back many a ringing sound as iron hoofs struck hard but for the muffling of the horses' feet, and on such a still night the slightest noise could have been heard a long way off.

At last the level lands beyond were reached, and the darkness of the timber and range was far less dense.

It was still dark, for the clouds obscured the stars and afar off a storm was gathering.

Suddenly the guide halted and spoke:

"We have crossed the range, and can now unmuffle the hoofs of the horses, for they may have to show their speed."

"Hark!"

All listened and the sound of many hoof-strokes came to their ears.

"The Indians have passed and are hastening on to the other pass."

"I think from the sound they have been reinforced, sir, and it would be well to get to the fort with all haste, as they may be in such numbers as to meditate a surprise."

"You are right, Mr. Rockwell, for there are more than a hundred Indians in the force we hear," I should say," the general added.

"That is my idea, sir."

"Shall I still lead on?"

"Certainly."

And again the guide rode to the front, the order of march being as before the range was reached.

The guide rode slowly at first, until well out from the great hills; then he increased his speed to a slow trot and soon after to a canter.

This gait was kept up steadily for several miles, in spite of the fatigue shown by the now thoroughly tired horses.

Suddenly the guide called back:

"There is the fort light, sir."

"Yes," and a feeling of relief came to all as afar off glimmered a light each moment growing brighter.

The guide continued on however—as steadily, and rapidly as before, until he suddenly drew rein, calling a halt in a tone that smacked of a soldier.

"What is it, Rockwell?"

"A party of horsemen are approaching from the fort, sir."

"Indians?"

"No, sir, for their horses are shod."

"It is doubtless a search party sent out for you, sir."

"You are right; so give them a call."
 "Not too loud, sir, for if the Indians intend a surprise you must be prepared to surprise them, sir."

"Very true—but, what is it?"
 The guide had paused and faced to the rear.
 "There are red-skins coming in our rear, sir. I will ride back and reconnoiter, while you go on and join the search party, sir," and in an instant the mysterious guide rode away on the back trail, just as a party of horsemen came up and a voice cried:

"Here they are, pards!"

CHAPTER VI.

DENOUNCED BY DASHING CHARLIE.

"THAT is Dashing Charlie's voice among a thousand," cried Captain DeLong as he heard the words uttered by one of the party approaching them.

"Yes, it is Emmett," the general answered, and then up rode the party of horsemen, a score in number.

They were about to give a cheer at finding the general and his party, when a word from the general checked them:

"Silence, men, for we have Indian foes dangerously near us."

"Indians about, sir?" asked the leader of the band of mounted scouts, and he was evidently surprised.

The one who asked the question was a man well known upon the border as a daring scout, skillful guide, and brave Indian-fighter—called Dashing Charlie* by his comrades. He was a tall, splendidly formed man, a giant in strength, and as quick as a panther in his movements.

His face was beardless and his hair was of golden hue, and fell down his back to his waist. He was dressed in buckskin, as were his men, wore a sombrero, and all were splendidly mounted and armed.

In response to his surprised query as to Indians being near, General Wesley, said:

"Yes, we both saw and heard them, and I am sure they are in large force, Emmett, and may even meditate an attack upon the fort."

"But, where are they, sir?"

"They are in the range."

"Yet you just came from there, sir?"

"True, and we were cut off, but met a stranger who guided us through the secret pass."

"Through the secret pass, General Wesley?" asked Dashing Charlie, very much like one who had just heard an amazing statement.

"Yes, just that, Emmett."

"There is a north pass, and a south pass, sir, and may I ask which you came through?"

"We went through the north pass, intending to return through the south pass, when we met the stranger I refer to, who told us Indians were lying in ambush there."

"Then he kept us on the prairie until dark and led us through the secret pass."

"Pardon me, General Wesley, if I seem persistent, but the Indians in the range have come down there since last night, and as for the secret pass, which you may have heard of, but one man besides myself knows how to go through it by day, and yet you say this stranger led you through there by night?"

"He certainly did, Emmett, and a most dangerous trail it was, I infer, for I could not see."

"It is at the risk of life to go through by day, sir."

"Well, we passed through by night," declared the general.

He could see that Dashing Charlie was incredulous, but asked:

"Who is this man besides yourself, Emmett, that knows the way through this secret pass?"

"The man who is known as Black Horse Bill, sir—the chief of the outlaw band of Black Horse Braves."

"Do you mean this man alone besides yourself, Emmett, knows that secret pass?"

"I do, sir."

"Do you know the man?"

"I do, sir."

"Describe him."

"A man as large as I am, sir, with long brown beard and hair falling to his belt."

"Yes."

"He dresses in cavalry boots, buckskin leggings, and rides a black horse with Mexican bridle and saddle."

"Well, Emmett, your description tallies with the man you call Black Horse Bill, yet I cannot believe that it was the outlaw chief who aided us so nobly, for his mission is to destroy, not to save."

"True, sir, yet he is the only man that I am aware of who knows the trail through the secret pass."

"But where is he, sir?"

"He heard Indians in our rear, just as we saw your party, and rode back to reconnoiter."

"General, I will take two of my men and go back to reconnoiter, and you shall hear soon just what the force of the Indians is; but it

would be well to be prepared against attack, sir, as they have heard that the fort has only half its garrison there at present."

"I will go on at once, and your men will act as escort, excepting those who go with you."

"Bring the strange guide back with you, if you meet him, for we owe him a very great debt of gratitude."

With this, General Wesley rode on with his party, the scouts falling in the rear as an escort.

It was nearly midnight when they reached their quarters, and found all excitement there, alarmed by their long stay, and which had caused the colonel commanding, in the absence of the general, to send Dashing Charlie and his men in search of them.

The colonel had finished his late supper which had been given the party at his quarters, and was bidding his guests good-night, when one of the scouts who had accompanied Dashing Charlie rode up at a run.

"Dashing Charlie wishes me to report, sir, that the Indians are in very heavy force in the range, and he believes are intending an attack at daylight on the fort."

"They will find us prepared for them; but where is Dashing Charlie?"

"I left him as we reached the range, sir, and just as he had captured Black Horse Bill, the Outlaw, whom he says he will bring with him to the fort," was the response of the scout, while the general mused aloud:

"And was our daring guide through the secret pass to-night the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill?"

CHAPTER VII.

DASHING CHARLIE'S PRISONER.

WHEN Dashing Charlie rode away from the general and his party, accompanied by two of his men, he was as anxious to solve the mystery as to the strange guide as he was to find out the number of red-skins in the range and their intentions.

He rode rapidly on, the three men gazing earnestly into the blackness about them, as they knew the danger of riding upon an ambush, and did not know but that Indian scouts on foot might be upon the prairie and catch sight of them first, being mounted.

But, the mysterious guide had gone on ahead, and that was something in their favor, as he would be halted first, Dashing Charlie supposed.

At last the range loomed up before them, and the scout drew rein and listened.

There were sounds ahead of them, and once more their way was resumed, but this time at a walk, for they had to be most cautious.

They now rode abreast, a scout on either side of Dashing Charlie, and some fifty feet apart.

The clouds were not so dense now, and the stars shone through here and there, causing the night to brighten considerably.

The threatened storm was passing around far to the northward, and there was a constant glimmer of lightning from the horizon in the distance.

The scouts held on until the range was within easy rifle-shot and again halted, near a clump of trees.

Then to their hearing came the sound of stamping hoofs and voices in the timber at the bottom of the ridge.

"There are Indians there, pards, and plenty of them. They are holding a council and plotting some mischief; so of course it means a move upon the fort."

Kirby, you must go to the fort with all speed, as soon as you get out of hearing, and report to the general that there are Indians galore in this range, and to look out for them."

"Yes, sir; I'll go at once—ha!"

The eyes of the three scouts fell upon a dark form advancing upon them from the thicket ahead.

It was a horse and rider and their course lay directly for the scouts.

"Only one, so we'll bag him," muttered Dashing Charlie.

On came the horseman, and although he had gotten within twenty feet of the three scouts he seemed not to have seen them.

A moment more, and Dashing Charlie, spurring to the side of the horseman, leveled his revolver in his face and said in a low, stern voice:

"You are Black Horse Bill, and you are my prisoner!"

The horseman quickly raised his hands above his head as though taken by surprise, and made no resistance, seeing which Dashing Charlie said:

"Now go to the fort, Kirby, and tell the general what I told you, and also say that I have captured Black Horse Bill."

"Yes, sir," answered the scout, and he rode away, delivering his message as has been recorded.

"You are not Indians, so why do you make war on me, a white man?" asked the horseman, whom Dashing Charlie had called Black Horse Bill.

"You heard me say that you were Black Horse Bill the outlaw?"

"You are mistaken, sir; I am neither Black Horse Bill nor an outlaw," was the incisive reply.

"Who are you, then?"

"My name is Horner Rockwell, and I am a Mounted Tramp."

"Are you the one who acted as guide to-night to General Wesley and his party?"

"I had that honor, sir."

"And how did you guide him through the range?"

"By a trail which I alone know."

"The secret pass?"

"Well, you may so call it, for it is a secret, I think."

"I know the pass."

"I am sure that you do not, sir."

"But, I do."

"Then, it is a pity you are not in hiding there, now."

"Why so?"

"Because here you are completely hemmed in by red-skins."

Dashing Charlie laughed lightly and replied:

"Why, my scout, Kirby, just went through to the fort."

"True; but the lines had not met then. He could not go now."

"Why?"

"See here! From yonder point in the range an Indian column is moving toward the fort, and from the spur above on this side a second column is moving, both to meet at a given place and forming now a V, with the range in their rear."

"Directly in front of you is the council-camp of the red-skins, and they remain here as a reserve while the two columns unite and attack the fort."

"You seem to know it all."

"I do, for I was hiding yonder in the range and heard their council-talk."

"You were?"

"Yes, and was going to the fort to report, when I met you and heard you order your man to tell the general what he might expect."

"You seem to be well informed, sir; but, what force have the red-skins?"

"They sent an advance guard of a hundred warriors to take possession of the range last night, and a force of fifteen hundred more have come to-night."

"You have ridden into a trap, sir, and there is but one way for you to escape."

"And how is that?"

"Through me," was the prompt reply of the stranger.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE SITUATION.

BUT for the seriousness of the situation Dashing Charlie would have laughed at the confident assertion of his prisoner that he could escape only through him.

But there was that about the man which caused him to refrain from ridiculing him, and he asked:

"How am I to know that the two columns you speak of are moving upon Fort Advance?"

"Dismount your man here and send him on foot until he comes in sight of the moving braves."

"When he returns let him go in this direction and behold them on the march."

"If you still doubt, then let him go toward the range and see if there are not several hundred braves still there."

"And what can hinder us from riding either to the right or left after the columns pass?"

"They leave a line of braves behind them to move up as a reserve; and mounted, you could not ride through them, while I doubt if you could get through on foot."

"And you know this from having been at their council?"

"I was not at their council, but near it—near enough to catch much that was said."

"And you say that you alone can save me and my pard here?"

"Yes, from capture or death."

"How can you do so?"

"By taking you to a place of safety."

"Where is it?"

"Will you trust me to do so?"

"Who are you?"

"I told you that I was but a Tramp on Horseback, a border wanderer."

"And you say that you are not Black Horse Bill?"

"I am not."

"You look like him."

"I am sorry, for it is not flattering to me to resemble a villain and border brute."

"How can you save us, when there is an Indian column upon either side, and a camp in the range in front?"

"If you knew the secret pass I spoke of you could also save yourself and comrade."

"That is two miles to the southward from here?"

"That proves that you do not know the pass to which I refer, though I do now know the one of which you speak."

* Captain Charles E. Emmett, now a dweller upon Long Island, and a man whose life has been a romance since boyhood, and whose adventures and escapes from death have been wonderful.—THE AUTHOR.

"There are two secret passes then through this range?"

"Yes."

"And where is the one to which you refer?"

"Very near us."

"And you say you can extricate us from this situation by leading us to safety through the secret pass you know of?"

"I assuredly can; and I have to add—if you remain here until the dawn comes you will be discovered and there will be no escape for you—bark!"

As the stranger spoke the sound of distant firing was heard, volleys of musketry and the deep booming of cannon, with yells and cheers intermingling.

"The Indians have attacked the fort!" cried Charlie, excitedly. "I must go there and—"

"Hold! you would not ride to your death, you and your comrade, and the fort was ready for them as the firing told, so they will be beaten back quickly."

"Signal-fires will be lighted here, on the range, as soon as the Indians are beaten back, and then our position will be discussed. Come! do you trust me to save you and your comrade?"

Dashing Charlie saw the truth of what the stranger said, and then on the range he already beheld flashing lights.

The red skins at the Council Camp seemed already to know that this force had not surprised the fort, but had been beaten back, for the firing and cheers told them this, and they were preparing to light their signal-fires to recall the assailing column.

So the scout said in his frank way:

"This is a strange situation, for I took you prisoner as Black Horse Bill, and now you are to become our guide to safety."

"This world is full of strange situations, and surprises, sir; but come, for we have no time to lose."

With this he led the way toward the thicket, not far distant, and which was a volcanic mass of rocks, completely sheltered by trees of many sizes and kinds.

Dashing Charlie knew the spot as an old Indian burying-ground; and later, where an old hunter had lived, and who was said to be a "Man of Bad Medicine," for both pale-faces and red-skins, as he gave all bad luck who went near his house.

For this reason his cabin in the timber was shunned by both whites and Indians, and when he mysteriously disappeared no one would go near his dwelling-place to see what had become of him.

As they rode into the thicket the stranger remarked:

"You must submit to being blindfolded, you and your comrade?"

"To be led into a trap?"

"You do not trust me, and yet I could lead you into a trap as easily with your eyes open, as I could blindfolded."

"I am in for it, so I submit; but what is to prevent the Indians trailing us here?"

"They would not come if they saw our trail, but, see it they could not, for from the spot where I met you the soil is such that no hoof will leave a track. Now, will you allow me to blindfold you?"

"Yes; have it so, if you deem it necessary."

The lone rider, and the two scouts dismounted; then the two were blindfolded, and leading the horses, one horse behind the other, the unknown pilot went ahead on foot, with Dashing Charlie and his companion close at his heels.

Thus they walked for some distance in a zig-zag way, and coming to an old cabin, built in the midst of a pile of rocks, and embowered in trees, they passed in through the open door.

"We are in a cavern, it seems, for I do not hear the firing," Dashing Charlie observed.

"You are where, in a few minutes more, you will be perfectly safe from all danger of the Indians," was the reply of the guide, while Dashing Charlie muttered to himself:

"Well, this is a strange situation."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SECRET WAY.

THE stranger had led the two scouts into a cabin, and there halted for a few minutes, when he again advanced, neither of them able to see what he had done, or where they were.

The darkness of the place did not seem to discommode the guide in the least, for, after advancing with the scouts and their horses some thirty feet, he again came to a halt and left them for a few minutes, with the admonition not to move, as they were in a dangerous position.

They obeyed implicitly, Dashing Charlie remarking to his comrade:

"We are in for it, Diamond Dan, so will have to see it through."

"I can't see through nothin' in this black hole, and I don't see what he blindfolded us for, as I does believe we is in a cave."

"So do I, for not a sound can we hear."

"I've a mind ter try and find out, Charlie, for I don't like—"

"All ready now, come on!" commanded the

guide, and his voice caused Diamond Dan to start, as the man was close by his side.

He led the way once more. It was smoother going, the blindfolded men knew, and nearly on a level the trail went, though they felt confident that it was winding.

The guide continued on for a long while—it seemed trebly as long as it really was, to the two scouts—without a word being spoken.

At last the guide called out:

"Steady, now, for there is a rough climb ahead of us."

Then they began to go upward, and several times came a warning from the man in advance to keep steady and not diverge to the right or left.

At last the scouts felt the cool air blowing into their faces, and were then still more certain that they had been in a cavern.

They now began to descend, and, after awhile came out upon the prairie, when the guide said:

"Now I will relieve you of your blindfolds, and, as we have just time to ride to the settlements, we will do so to warn them, for, beaten back from the fort, the Indians will retreat that way."

"Yes; but the settlements are beyond the range, and—"

"And we too are beyond the range, sir."

"What?"

And Dashing Charlie gazed eagerly about him. The stars were shining brightly now, and he saw that he was indeed upon the prairie, the range half a mile away.

"Charlie, he has led us under the mountain, or I am a liar!" cried Diamond Dan.

"You are right, Dan; we are on the other side of the range," said Dashing Charlie, with intense amazement.

"You certainly are, sir, and I came by my secret way."

"But we have no time to lose if we would warn the settlements, and it would be well to strike them at three different points so the settlers can gather more quickly. I will take the north end."

"Yes, and I the south end, while you, Dan, go to the center. But, where will we meet again?"

And Dashing Charlie turned to the stranger.

"At the fort, sir, to-morrow or next day, perhaps in the fight, if the Indians retreat by way of the settlement."

"Which I fear they will do; but, let me express my gratitude for your service to my comrade and myself to-night."

"Do not speak of it, for I simply took you out of harm's way by myself."

"Now let us be off before dawn comes to show us to the Indian sentinels on the range."

And with a wave of the hand the range pilot rode off at a gallop.

"Dan, I don't understand that man."

"Nor does I; but he's a dandy from 'way-back, Charlie."

"Yes, but is he, or is he not, Black Horse Bill?"

"Ask me something easy, Charlie, for I pass."

"Well, let us be off, and I'll come your way when I have warned the South End Settlement."

"All right," and the two fort scouts rode away over the prairie, obliquing from each other at the start.

When dawn came they had all gotten out of sight of any red-skin—settling on the range by reaching a heavy timberland on their way, and soon after sunrise Dashing Charlie rode into the settlement known as the South End, and where the scattered settlers little dreamed of danger from a large force of hostiles.

He quickly spread the alarm of an attack on the fort, and that his belief was that, beaten off there, the red-skins would retreat by way of the settlement, striking it that night with a surprise.

Quickly word flew by couriers from house to house. At the alarm the settlers rallied, well-armed and mounted at a given point of rendezvous to meet the Indians several miles away and ambush them before they could reach the settlement.

Couriers arrived later in the day from the center and south end, stating that the settlers were marching in force from them to the same rendezvous, and that scouts had been sent out to discover where the Indians would strike first, so that they could be headed off.

Two hours before nightfall there were three hundred thoroughly-armed, well-mounted men at the rendezvous, ready to defend their homes and beat back the overwhelming force of warriors on the war-path.

Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan, mounted upon fresh horses, had gone out as scouts, accompanied by a couple of settlers to discover, if possible the position of the hostiles, and the men from the South End Settlement stated that a stranger had given them warning, told them where to assemble, and that he had then said he would ride out to reconnoiter and give them due notice of the coming of their red foes.

But, who this stranger was, only one man in the settlement seemed to know, and he said:

"Well, mef, I hope I'm wrong, but if he ain't Black Horse Bill the outlaw chief, I'll give it up I don't know a face when I see it."

CHAPTER X.

ON THE WAR PATH.

NIGHT came on, and the settlers lay in ambush.

No word had come from the three scouts of the advance of the red-skins, but they were too well versed in Indian cunning not to be fully prepared for them.

Back in the center settlement, five miles away, the old men, boys and some of the women formed a home guard as a reserve, and from the position of the force in the field, should the Indians direct their attack toward either the north or south end, informed of their intention by the scouts, the defenders could get into position ahead of them.

Dashing Charlie had taken position some ten miles from the settlers' position, so as to give them ample time should he see the hostiles advancing by his trail.

Night had come on, and while his horse fed near him he stood gazing out over the prairie from his position in a small clump of timber.

Suddenly his horse pricked up his ears and listened.

"Hear something, old fellow?" asked the scout.

In a few seconds his ears caught a sound.

"Hoof-falls," he said, and stepping to his horse, the wary scout put the bit in his mouth, for he had taken it out to enable the animal to feed.

"One horse only, and he is coming this way!"

"Surely Diamond Dan has not gone further off than I have? No; it must be a courier from the fort; and if so, the Indians got such a whipping they did not come this way in their retreat."

"I am sorry, because another severe lesson would have helped them learn to stay in their own country, and the settlers are in position to give it to them."

"I must see who this is, and be careful, too, or he may fire at my challenge."

So saying, Dashing Charlie mounted his horse, unsling his rifle and faced in the direction the horseman was coming, when he was suddenly startled by hoof-beats in the rear.

"Who can these be, I wonder?" he mused.

"Has anything happened at the rendezvous?"

In a few moments three of the settlers rode up.

"Couldn't wait," they explained, seeing Charlie's surprise. "Got so uneasy that we put out on a scout, hoping to find you."

Charlie was annoyed.

"You shouldn't have left the force," he told them. "Every man will be wanted there, and don't you be cavortin' around to find out what I'm doing!"

"But, I say, men," he added, "be hist! See that horse and rider standin' thar eying us?"

All looked where Dashing Charlie pointed, and there, sure enough, stood a statuesque figure—that of the Black Horse and his master—clearly limned in the night-light.

"I do believe it is that stranger!" declared Dashing Charlie, and then came a challenge:

"Ho, there. Advance, or I fire!"

"Friend or foe?" came the demand.

"Dashing Charlie!" was the scout's answer, for at once he had recognized the stern, decided voice of the stranger guide and Mounted Tramp.

Instantly the horseman rode forward and drew rein by the group.

"On the alert I see; and it is well, for the Indians are coming in large force."

"They divided after nightfall, sending their wounded on toward their village, with the soldiers pursuing, while picked braves and horses came this way, and all of a thousand of them."

"As they separated at the river, crossing there, the soldiers will not know of their dividing, and push on after the smaller and crippled force, while those who come this way hope to strike the settlement in the center, rush through to South End, and thus retreat to the mountains."

"Come, we must all go and steady the settlers for the tussle!"

Dashing Charlie had listened with surprise, and as he rode on with the stranger in advance of the others, he asked:

"I should like to know how you discovered all this?"

"I went to Lookout Mound, after warning the North End Settlement, and saw the retreat with my field glass."

"I saw the soldiers in pursuit, too, and when dark came, rode toward the river where the Indians divided."

"Convinced of this, I came on to give warning."

"But, what horse have you ridden on this long round?"

"This one—the Black Diamond."

"Why, I left my horse broken down in the settlement, and this one is none too fresh for this further ride."

"They are not the equal of Black Diamond—in fact I have never met his match, and if I do I shall have him if—"

"If what, sir?"

"If I have to steal him," was the ready response.

Dashing Charlie made no reply. He was

more and more interested in the stranger; and, as he had heard the remark of the settler, who had been a prisoner to the outlaw band of Black Horse Braves, that the man was none other than Black Horse Bill, just as Charlie had said he was, the scout was decidedly suspicious of the rider.

"Well," he at last said, "your horse is a wonder, and so are you."

"Granted, as far as Black Diamond is concerned; but, why do you say I am a wonder?"

"I cannot fathom you."

"Who of us can fathom each other, Dashing Charlie? What human being can read another's heart?" and the voice became almost pathetic as the question was asked.

Charlie Emmett did not answer, and then the unknown added:

"What force have the settlers gathered for defense?"

"Three hundred men."

"Are they in good position?"

"A splendid position, which can be made a perfect death-trap for the reds if they do not suspect an ambush."

"They will not, for they know the fort could not have warned the settlement of their danger. They hope for a complete surprise and massacre."

"And may meet with one themselves; but, shall we not all push on and give ample time to the settlers?"

"Yes, for Black Diamond is good for a night's ride yet," and the two men in the lead, closely followed by the three settlers, pressed on at a sweeping gallop.

Within half an hour they had reached the wooded ridge where the settlers were lying in ambush. The position was approached by a narrow valley, and Dashing Charlie said, as he rode up to the spot where the leaders stood:

"Gentlemen, this is Mr. Rockwell, the scout who warned the south end. He now brings you news that the Indians are coming to strike the center settlement first, and in very large force, so there must be no mistake made. See that every thing is ready for desperate work!"

CHAPTER XI.

SETTLERS AT BAY.

THE situation of the settlers, as Dashing Charlie had said, was a splendid one for an ambush.

The ridge was a natural fortification, while in the rear was a level plain, where grew the most luxuriant grass, which the horses were feeding upon, and beyond was a creek of clearest water.

The men had been taken to their position by daylight, so thus discovered the nature of the ground in their front.

A few hundred yards away was a stream with high banks and a narrow ford, so that in a retreat, the Indians would be buddled together there and be within distance for the long range rifles to play upon them.

The settlers were men of nerve, and most of them had had experience in border warfare. Hardly one of them who had not seen desperate fighting, and, of course, as a rule, they were crack shots.

Their leader was an ex-army officer, who had been a captain, but was called by courtesy "Colonel" Knight. His military training served him well in organizing his command.

The colonel, with a dozen of his officers, were grouped together when Dashing Charlie and the stranger rode up, and there was in the group also the settler who had said that he recognized in Horner Rockwell none other than the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill.

With the words of Dashing Charlie the settler quickly said:

"See here, Dashing Charlie, I know you as chief of scouts at Fort Advance and as one of the gamest men upon the border; but, do you know the man you are with?"

"I just introduced him as Mr. Horner Rockwell—one who notified South End this morning of their danger; and, let me here also say, the man to whom you now owe it that you are prepared to meet the Indians marching upon you."

"But are there any Indians coming? or is it a ruse to get us away from our horses that the Black Horse Braves may slip in and get them?"

"Your name is Loudon, I believe?" said Dashing Charlie, calmly.

"Yes; Rufus Loudon, and at your service, and the service of your outlaw pard, too, for I know him to be Black Horse Bill!"

"See here, Mr. Rufus Loudon, one thing at a time. You ask if there are any Indians, and let me say to you that my pard here saved General Wesley last night and several ladies and officers from being captured and killed by the redskins."

"Later he saved me and my two pards, one of whom, Diamond Dan, is here."

"The Indians, over a thousand strong, attacked the fort, were driven off, and are now, fully a thousand strong, marching upon you here, while the soldiers are pursuing the smaller force with their wounded."

"But for my pard Rockwell you would not have been warned, and you can imagine the result."

"Now let me say that, even if he be Black Horse Bill, he has saved the fort and this settlement, and I shall stand by him."

"If you know me, as you say you do, then you will understand that I mean what I say."

The words of Charlie Emmett were listened to in silence and they made their intended impression.

But Rufus Loudon was one of those men who could not get an idea out of his head and would never retreat, right or wrong. He was as stubborn as a mule and in answer said:

"Well, you have some reason for backing up your outlaw pard now, Dashing Charlie, and he has some motive for giving us warning; but, there is a big reward offered for the head, dead or alive, of Black Horse Bill, and when this fight is over I intend to take my man."

For the first time, then, did Horner Rockwell speak, and his words were low, but earnest:

"Pardon me, sir, but allow me to assert that you are wrong. I am not Black Horse Bill, and I warn you now that I will not submit to any attempt on your part to make an outlaw out of me, or to seek money under false pretenses, so be warned, I beg of you!"

Colonel Knight and others now joined in and urged Rufus Loudon to desist; but the obstinate man would only remain quiet under protest, and with the avowed purpose of making the alleged outlaw a prisoner when the fight was over.

He was just beginning to assert that he believed there were no Indians near, when a settler, stationed at the ford, came running up and reported the red-skins near at hand and in large force.

The splashing of the horses in the water was distinctly heard. Every man went to his post.

Thus minutes passed away; then the keenest-sighted settlers beheld through the darkness a moving mass of red horsemen advancing across the valley.

They had massed their force at the ford, and, contrary to the usual marching order of Indians, were coming along bunched together.

Up the hill they rode. The few in the lead were allowed to pass the ambush before the order rung out from Dashing Charlie:

"Fire!"

With the command three hundred rifles flashed; then followed a popping of revolvers, while the wild war-cries of the settlers drowned the yells of the astonished savages.

Above all was heard the terrible war-cry of the chief of scouts, Dashing Charlie, so well known to the Indians, and they believed that he and his "Mounted Deadshots," as the fort scouts were called, were aiding the settlers.

The first volley had caused the first ranks of braves and ponies to go down in the dust, and as the surprised and hard hit Indians surged forward, up the ridge, with wild yells, they were met by another and another withering fire which sent them back with demoniacal yells of rage, in wildest flight.

Rapidly rung the shots after them, and, as they crowded across the ford, others fell, until the Indians' advancing column became a perfect stampede of terrified savages, while mounting in hot haste the settlers started in pursuit, under the guidance of Dashing Charlie.

CHAPTER XII.

DASHING CHARLIE CHIPS IN.

THE Indians had certainly met with a great surprise, and had been repulsed with heavy loss in braves and ponies, the latter, especially, for when the retreat began, many a red-skin horse was carrying double.

They were greatly disappointed and infuriated, over their failure to surprise the fort, and in being beaten off there with many dead left on the field, and failing to have General Wesley and his party ride into an ambush in the range, had greatly annoyed and disconcerted their scheme for a grand slaughter; and now, when they had sought to get even by a dash upon the settlement, in their retreat, and counted upon scalps, captures and plunder in plenty, which would more than redeem their disaster at the fort, their fury at the surprise can readily be imagined; but with scores of braves and ponies down they were forced to flight, for well they knew what the brave settlers would be in pursuit—that not a red-skin would be spared.

They had heard the wild, well-known war-cry of Dashing Charlie, and naturally supposed that they had him and his terrible Deadshots upon their trail.

So the flight was begun in the darkness, and the pursuit followed quickly.

For some distance the main force of settlers followed the flying Indians, even after day had dawned, but after that only the younger and best mounted men went on with Dashing Charlie.

As the others began to straggle back along the trail of flight and pursuit, a party of a dozen or more came upon a strange scene in a timber mottle.

They found there a white man seated upon a fallen tree, while not far from him lay half a dozen braves and four ponies. Seated upon the ground near this man was an Indian chief, who was having a couple of wounds dressed by the white, while his pony was standing near.

This good Samaritan was Horner Rockwell. There was a bruise upon his temple and his clothes were torn and dust-covered.

The Indian chief, in all the glory of his war-paint, was wounded in the head and arm, and was calmly submitting to his wounds being dressed by his white foe.

Up dashed the party of horsemen, and they halted with weapons covering the Indian, while one cried:

"We will have his scalp, too, and he is a chief."

"Hold, gentlemen! This Indian chief is under my protection, and I will not see a wounded man, red-skin though he be, murdered, though I know you naturally feel hate and revenge toward him."

Horner Rockwell spoke with calm determination, and one of the settlers answered:

"Do you say you intend to protect that red-skin, pard?"

"It is just what I do say and will do. I was in the pursuit, and got among a number of Indians, when I was felled by a blow, here on my face, from my saddle. My horse was captured, and I, after being run over, came here."

"A party of red-skins dashed in upon me, and there they lie, and this chief, though wounded, could have killed me, as my revolver was empty. Instead, he lowered his rifle and called me his brother."

"I at once set to work to dress his wounds, and told him he should go free, and I mean what I say."

"Come, chief, mount your pony and go your way, for as you were too magnanimous to take my life, I will spare yours."

"White chief good man! Heap brave man, for kill five strong warriors there and wound chief two times. Chief love brave man if he is pale-face foe."

"Man-Killer great chief! Have good heart and won't forget—good-by!"

With this the chief held out his hand, which Horner Rockwell grasped, while he said:

"Now go, Man-Killer, and lose no time."

"Hold on, Injun!" cried one of the settlers, leveling his revolver.

"And you hold on, sir, for if you pull trigger on that Indian I will kill you!" cried the stranger in a tone of unmistakable determination, while he leveled his revolver at the settler.

For an instant it looked as though there was to be trouble, the stranger against the dozen settlers; but then, one who was the leader of the party said:

"Put your gun up, Dalton, for the stranger has a right to spare the chief if he wishes to, after his record lying there, and which caused the red-skin to admire him. Let him go, and he will tell his people that we spared him."

"All right, cap'n, if you says so," answered Dalton, when he saw that the others were of the same opinion.

"Go, chief!" the stranger said, and leaping upon his horse the chief darted out of the timber with a yell of mingled delight and defiance.

They watched him ride rapidly away, and then turned to Rockwell, just as there rode up through the timber Rufus Loudon and a score of settlers returning from the chase.

"Ho, pards, here is Black Horse Bill! Now he is my game!"

"Up with him, say I, and his outlaw band will quickly leave the trail!"

It was very evident that those with Rufus Loudon had been won over to his way of thinking about the stranger, for they cried out in chorus:

"Yes, string him up!"

The one who had sided against Dalton tried to stem the tide against the stranger, but in vain, for if he was Black Horse Bill then he should be hanged.

At once there was a rush upon the man, who though he had leveled his weapon at Dalton was at their mercy, for his weapon was not loaded.

A moment more and the man who called himself the Mounted Tramp, would have been hanged by the crowd of settlers, but, as they seized him, Dashing Charlie suddenly spurred into their midst, a revolver in each hand, while he cried:

"Gents, it's my play! so who calls me?"

CHAPTER XIII.

JUST IN TIME.

DASHING CHARLIE had continued on in pursuit of the red-skins, until told by a settler that he had seen the strange scout dash into the midst of a band of Indians and fall severely wounded.

At once he determined to ride back over the trail to succor the man to whom the victory was due, and so he turned about and left the pursuit to be continued by Colonel Knight and his settlers.

He saw the party of horsemen ride into the timber, and so went there to find out if they had seen the stranger or not.

To his amazement he saw the Mounted Tramp in the midst of a crowd of settlers, and a glance showed him that they were determined to hang their benefactor.

Seeing Rufus Loudon there was sufficient for

Charlie to know that he was the ringleader in the cruel act against Rockwell, and with angry face and flashing eyes he spurred his horse through the crowd, drawing his revolver as he did so and facing the settlers in a way that showed his readiness to die right there in defense of the man who had so won his friendship and confidence.

"See here, Dashing Charlie, you have no right to chip in here, for we know our business, and if you know when you are in good luck just draw out of this game," cried Rufus Loudon, in a threatening way, and this speech Dalton and several others signified their readiness to back up.

"Go slow, my friend, for I am in to stay, and I know that there are men here whose good sense and justice will not see the man who saved their families and their homes from death and destruction hanged like a dog because you and a few others assert that he is an outlaw.

"I tell you that this man has saved you all, and I will see that he is not harmed by you, Loudon, and your gang."

There was no mistaking these words.

They were uttered in a tone and with a mien that showed they meant all they could express, and the pale, determined face of Charlie Emmett was evidence enough of his intention to enforce his determination.

His appeal to the settlers as men of sense and justice had its effect, too, for four-fifths of those present at once showed a readiness to side with the scout, which Rufus Loudon and those supporting him were not slow to discover.

As for Rockwell, he had shown no fear in the face of his threatened doom. He was calm and not at all cowed.

On the contrary, the stern lines of his countenance showed that, had his weapons been loaded, he certainly would have defended his life to the bitter end against all odds.

He had stood perfectly silent during the scene that followed the arrival of the scout, and then, scrutinizing the faces of the crowd, he saw that he was not wholly friendless.

One of the settlers, and a man who had much influence among the others, now spoke up:

"Dashing Charlie, you are right, for, no matter if the man be Black Horse Bill, as Loudon says, he is entitled to go free after what he has done for us; and then, if you can capture him, well and good; that's his lookout; but now I say he goes free."

"But he is an ally of Injuns, for he set a chief free a while since," Dalton chimed in.

"What do you mean?" asked Dashing Charlie.

"Permit me to explain, sir," interposed the lone rider. "I got into a crowd of flying redskins, and was felled from my saddle by a blow and my noble horse was captured."

"I was half-stunned, but reached this timber when others dashed up and attacked me."

"There they lie, excepting their chief, whom I twice wounded, and then, having fired my last shot, I was at his mercy, when to my amazement, he did not kill me."

"I at once dressed his wounds, and told him I would protect him, which I did, setting him free, as this man says."

"And you did right to serve him as he did you," was Dashing Charlie's emphatic response.

"I did what I deemed to be my duty, sir; but now let me suggest, as this man Loudon seems so determined to make me out to be none other than the outlaw, Black Horse Bill, and is anxious to have me die, that we settle what appears to be verging upon trouble among neighbors—those for and against me—that he face me upon the field as man to man and with what weapons he may desire."

A perfect yell greeted this bold proposition of the stranger. It was evident that he had won the day, for all those sturdy fellows admired his pluck and bearing.

Rufus Loudon turned pale as he saw that he had lost ground and would have still urged that the stranger be punished, when he was greeted with cries that urged him to accept the challenge or back down.

Dalton slipped from the front to the back-ground, evidently no longer anxious to attract attention to himself in that crowd.

"Come, Loudon, what answer have you to say to giving my pard satisfaction for insulting him and seeking to hang him, for if you kill him you'll get your reward if he is Black Horse Bill, and if he kills you, why, your neighbors know best whether it will be a good riddance or not. Now, do you fight or show the cur?" and there was an angry look in Dashing Charlie's eyes.

"I will fight him, and then make you face me, Dashing Charlie, for I allow no man to insult me and live," was the savage response of the settler.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DUEL ON THE PRAIRIE.

THE settler's face showed that he felt that he had been caught in a trap which he had set for another.

The courage of the strange scout had been too well proven, for not excepting Dashing

Charlie, he had been the most desperate foe of the red-skins that day, and there in the timber lay the record of his deadly aim and pluck, while he had not flinched when the rope was about his neck.

The settlers rather enjoyed the situation in which Rufus Loudon found himself, for, though a man of influence in their midst, he was of a quarrelsome nature and several times had been engaged in fatal encounters which he had brought on by his overbearing nature.

"Well, Black Horse Bill, how do you wish to settle this affair?" said Loudon, turning with an air of feigned indifference to the strange scout.

"If you refer to me, and I suppose that you do, let me say that you can choose your own weapons, sir," said the stranger.

"Well, I say revolvers every time, and a fight on horseback," was the brusque response.

"You could not have pleased me more, sir," came the smiling reply from Rockwell, and turning to Dashing Charlie he asked:

"May I request the loan of some cartridges, sir, and your horse, for as I said, I emptied my ammunition-case and the Indians got Black Diamond?"

"Certainly, pard, all I have is at your service, and I am awful sorry you lost your horse."

"Oh! I'll get him again some day," was the confident reply, and there seemed no thought of the danger he then stood in, and Dashing Charlie and the settlers noticed this as did also Rufus Loudon, who smiled and said:

"Don't be so sure of that, pard."

"Dalton, will you act for me?"

"Yes," but the word was not uttered in a way that showed it gave him great pleasure.

The fact was that Dalton wished to be on the side of the majority now.

"And you will act for me, sir?"

"With pleasure every time," was Dashing Charlie's response, for the strange scout had turned to him.

Rockwell then loaded his revolvers, and Dashing Charlie said:

"You are to start back to back at the word, ride at a run until ordered to the right-about, and then dash toward each other, firing as you advance, and as many shots as you please."

"Is this satisfactory?"

"It is to me," was Rockwell's response, while Rufus Loudon said:

"Oh, yes, any way so I get the reward offered for Black Horse Bill's scalp."

The remark was not well received by the settlers and Loudon observed as much.

Dalton led up his horse to him, while he looked over his weapons, and while the settlers ranged themselves in a row to watch the duel on horseback.

Dashing Charlie led the way to the open prairie.

Reaching a given point Dashing Charlie halted, and placed each horse in position, their heads in opposite directions.

The two men stepped to their sides and awaited the order to mount, while Dashing Charlie went to one side, thirty steps, and Dalton to the other.

Tossing for the word, Dashing Charlie had won, and as he took his position he saw that Rufus Loudon's face was black with passion, and lips set with resolve, while the countenance of the stranger was serene to indifference.

"Mount and away!" shouted Dashing Charlie, in a voice that would have rung down an entire brigade.

Rufus Loudon used his stirrup, yet was quickly mounted, but the stranger leaped lightly into the saddle, and was the quickest away by some seconds, and seated well before his horse had gone three lengths.

On the horses bounded until they were separated by a hundred yards, when loud rung Dashing Charlie's command:

"Right-about—charge!"

The animal ridden by the stranger came around as though on a pivot at the utterance of the first word, and he was charging upon the other before Rufus Loudon had gotten fairly around, and all saw that he could have gotten several shots at his enemy's back had he so willed.

But he did not draw his revolver until Loudon faced him and first pulled trigger.

Then, quick as a flash, as he neared his foe, the Mounted Tramp drew his revolver and fired, while Dashing Charlie cried:

"A dead center shot in the forehead!"

It was true, the one shot fired by the stranger had hit the settler in the very center of the forehead, a magnificent, though deadly display of marksmanship.

In spite of its being one of their number who had fallen, and his slayer accused of being Black Horse Bill, the outlaw chief, the settlers gave a cheer of admiration, which Rockwell responded to by courteously raising his sombrero, as he rode up to where Dashing Charlie stood.

Leaping to the ground, he said quietly:

"I thank you, Dashing Charlie, for the loan of your horse and your kind services."

"I would have only winged him, had he not threatened to hold you responsible for defending me; so I decided to have you run no risks, brave man and dead shot though you be."

"You are the dearest shot I know, Mr. Rockwell, and you acted nobly."

"Now come, for I must get one of those captured Indian ponies for you."

"The roan which Dalton has I will buy if he will sell him to me. Will you ask him, for he is not friendly toward me, you know?"

"Yes, I'll get him for you," and Dashing Charlie walked toward Dalton, who was bending over the body of Rufus Loudon.

CHAPTER XV.

SECURING A MOUNT.

THERE were among the settlers men who still believed that Rufus Loudon had been right in claiming that the strange scout was none other than Black Horse Bill.

He had given no account of himself, Dashing Charlie had met him only the day before, and who he was, if not the outlaw chief, no one knew.

That he had saved the settlement there was no denying, but why he had done so, if he was the outlaw, was the surprise until it was hinted by Dalton that, if the settlers had been wiped out, then the stage line and wagon trains would stop, so that he would find his occupation as a robber gone.

This suggestion seemed to impress the people with its truth; but for the good that he had done it was decided that it would be best not to push any claim of outlawry against him, only to watch him.

He certainly had not been in the wrong in his duel with Loudon, and his pluck had won the admiration of the settlers.

When the affair was over, therefore, they were content to let it drop and devote themselves to the duties devolving upon them.

All along the trail from the ridge, the scene of the ambush, to the spot where the pursuit of the Indians had ended, there were strewn the bodies of dead warriors, which were to be gathered up and buried, for the settlers would not leave them to be devoured by wolves.

So the settlers were to form in squads and go over the trails, while Dashing Charlie, having been joined by Diamond Dan, determined to push on after the Indians and hold on the trail until he came to where the soldiers in pursuit had halted or turned back.

He had asked Dalton to sell the roan horse to him, but, supposing that he wanted him for the stranger, he had refused.

"I would like to have you go on with me, Mr. Rockwell, for I will have to go on, as I know that I will be needed," said Dashing Charlie.

"I should like to go, sir, but do not let me detain you, as I shall follow your trail as soon as I can secure a horse," was the answer.

So Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan started on their way, leaving the stranger behind them.

The surprise and running fight had not been an altogether bloodless affair for the settlers, as some five of them had been killed and fully two-score more or less seriously wounded.

These had to be looked after, their traps found, and the belongings and weapons of the dead Indians, and the work was begun at once.

For some reason the strange scout found it hard to find a horse for himself.

Though he had really the right to claim those whose riders he had slain, he did not do so, and the settlers who had captured ponies said that they did not care to sell them.

At last the stranger went up to Dalton, for he had taken a wonderful fancy to the roan horse which he had and which had belonged to one of the head chiefs, who had fallen beneath the aim of Rockwell himself.

The horse was a size over the other Indian ponies, clean-limbed and as graceful as a deer.

He had a small head, arching neck, and the gaunt body which showed an animal of great speed and endurance.

He was the best equipped of all the captured horses, and as a last resort the strange scout decided to go to Dalton.

So he said:

"See here, sir: you have not been very friendly toward me, but that has nothing to prevent a business transaction. I neither seek your friendship nor your enmity, but I do want that horse, for I killed the chief who rode him."

"Who says so?" growled Dalton.

"I say so, and others, did they speak, would confirm my words; but that is neither here nor there, for it is the horse I want and I am willing to pay you well for him."

"I knew you wanted him and that is why I wouldn't let Dashing Charlie have him."

"I notice that you have several, so I ask you to sell me the roan."

"I won't do it."

"Why?"

"Because you're afoot and you can walk."

The two were still in the timber where the strange scout had so nearly lost his life, and then other settlers were near, all looking on with interest.

There stood Dalton by the side of the roan, with three other horses in lead.

"I say, Dalton, sell him the horse," said one.

"I won't."

"Waal, I seen him kill ther chief that rode

him and by rights he belongs to him; but, if you won't sell the roan let him have another," a second of the settlers urged.

"So says I, Pard Dalton, for it hain't jist right to be hard on him," remarked the third.

"No, he can walk; he gets no horse of me," was the surly reply.

The strange scout took from his basket a buckskin bag, and as he did so remarked:

"Out here on the border that roan is worth fifty dollars, but I'll give you just double, five twenty-dollar gold-pieces, and I place it in your hands, sir, to give to Mr. Dalton, for that horse is mine," and, quick as a flash, having handed over the gold to one of the three men, the revolver of the Mounted Tramp covered the settler, and walking up to him he held him thus covered while he leaped upon the roan and rode away, keeping his aim upon Dalton until he was out of range, and the three other settlers looking on in dumb amazement at his boldness.

CHAPTER XVI.

DIAMOND DAN'S ASSERTION.

DASHING CHARLIE and Diamond Dan rode on over the trail followed by the flying red-skins, until they met the last of the settlers coming back.

They had been forced to turn at last, having been led into an ambush by the cunning enemy, and lost several of their number and others wounded.

These dead and wounded they now had with them, and of course were very anxious to get back with all speed to the settlement.

"It is a light loss in comparison to what a surprise of the settlement would have been, Dashing Charlie, and we owe you the deepest gratitude," said Colonel Knight warmly.

"Not me, colonel, for I only accompanied the one to whom all thanks are due, the man who calls himself the Mounted Tramp."

"Say, Dashing Charlie, what do you think of this charge Rufus Loudon makes against him?" the colonel asked.

"Louden has made his last charge, sir, for he was killed in a duel with the Mounted Tramp this morning," and Dashing Charlie told the story of the affair to the surprised settlers.

"And where is he now?"

"I left him back on the trail, sir, on foot, and will you please see that he gets a horse and ask him to follow me with all speed?"

"I will, Dashing Charlie."

"Please say to him that I will wait for him at the Blue Mound, sir, for twenty-four hours, but if I go on, Diamond Dan will be there awaiting him."

"All right; I'll tell him; but now, let me know what you think of this charge that he is Black Horse Bill?"

"Well, Colonel Knight, when I first saw him I was sure that he was that man."

"You have seen this outlaw chief, then?"

"Yes, sir, several times."

"And he looks like this Mounted Tramp?"

"Yes, sir, and dresses like him, while he also rides just such a horse, for though I have as fine animals as there are on the plains, the black horse of the outlaw chief outfoots him every time."

"Can it be possible that this tramp on horseback really is the outlaw?"

"I do not now believe that he is, sir."

"Well, he rendered us a great service and I shall not forget him, and if he is Black Horse Bill, then that road agent is not nearly as black as he has been painted."

"That is the case with all of us, colonel, and the same thing is said of the devil, too; but I must be going, sir, and if you meet the Mounted Tramp, please tell him, as I said, that I will await him at Blue Mound, for I wish to take him to the fort with me."

"If he goes there, then he is not Black Horse Bill," the colonel said emotionally.

"That is my opinion, sir."

"I am sorry for the poor fellows who went under, but I am glad that it was no worse—"

"Good-by, colonel."

With a wave of his hand to the settlers, Dashing Charlie rode on while they gave him three rousing cheers, the example being set by Colonel Knight.

Dashing Charlie raised his hat and went on his way, Diamond Dan by his side.

"They means well, but they was awful bitter toward our strange pard," said Diamond Dan, who, though most roughly attired, wore a large diamond ring upon the little finger of his left hand, and its match in a scarf which was ragged and soiled.

But they were brilliant, valuable stones, and had gained the man his name of Diamond Dan, while they had nearly cost him his life scores of times at the hands of those who envied him their possession.

"Yes, they were bitter, and I was glad I arrived as I did, for he was unarmed and at their mercy."

"Had he been armed, the settlers would have had more cause for mourning dead men than they have now."

"Well, you saved him, Pard Charlie; but he did that man Loudon up in good shape, now, didn't he?"

"Yes, he has seen service before, and knows how to take care of himself."

"I only hopes they won't do him up now you has gone, Charlie."

"Ah! do you think there is any possibility of their doing so?" asked Dashing Charlie, anxiously.

"Waal, they don't love him in spite of what they owe him in what he has done for them."

"I don't wonder that they are down on Black Horse Bill, Dan, for he has robbed a number of them, yes, and killed men from the settlement, too."

"He has done that, and more, for he has yanked in some good money belonging to the Government and soldiers, and called in the chips of several men in blue, while he's as hard ter run down as a antelope."

"Well, he'll be caught some day, Dan, and then he'll hang, sure."

"Charlie!"

"Yes, Dan."

"You don't think the Mounted Tramp is the outlaw chief?"

"I cannot think so, after what he has done, Dan."

Diamond Dan was silent a moment, and then said again, in his serious way:

"Pard Charlie?"

"Yes."

"That Tramp Scout saved the general, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And them as was with him?"

"Sure."

"The general has offered a reward out of his own pocket for him, independent of what the Government has done."

"Yes, he has, Dan."

"The Tramp knows this country perfect."

"Indeed he does."

"And tuk us a way through the mountains you didn't know."

"He surely did."

"Well, Charlie, I knows Black Horse Bill well."

"You do, Dan?"

"I does, for I war his prisoner, and though I wouldn't say so afore the settlers, I tells you now, Dashing Charlie, that the Mounted Tramp are Black Horse Bill," declared Diamond Dan, impressively, as the two scouts rode along together.

CHAPTER XVII.

DIAMOND DAN'S DIAMONDS.

DASHING CHARLIE was surprised at the earnest accusation of Diamond Dan regarding the Mounted Tramp, and said:

"Do you really mean it, Dan?"

"I does."

"You say you were his prisoner?"

"I was."

"You never spoke of this before?"

"I never spoke of knowing him afore."

"Why not?"

"Waal, I thought I was about the only one who did, and felt that maybe it would come my way to make money out of it by recognizing him."

"When we met him, and you said it was Black Horse Bill, then I kept my mouth shut."

"So it went on, while he was with ther settlers, for I don't forget a favor done me, and it is jist as sart'in, Charlie, that we would have been bagged or kilt by them Injuns, if he hadn't led us inter a safe gittin'-out place."

"It is certain that we would, Dan, for he saved our lives beyond any doubt."

"So says I to myself, I hain't a-going back on him by saying who he is, for I seen thar was plenty of them settlers as wanted ter string him up."

"And you were his prisoner, you say?"

"Yas."

"When was that?"

"A year ago."

"How did it happen?"

"It was when I was riding mail courier on the trail, before I came to you to go with you as scout."

"I was riding along one night on the Overland when all of a sudden I was held up."

"I seen but one man but he were enough, and I up with my hands when he called me."

"He rode up to me and were mounted upon a black horse, and in fact it were ther Tramp."

"You saw him well?"

"It was bright moonlight and I seen him as I sees you now."

"He asked me in a pleasant way how my health was, if my family was well, and what business I was following."

"I answered him all he asked, he was so polite, yer know, and had his revolver so convenient fer going off in every direction."

"He then told me he'd borrow the leather mail-bag I carried, said Uncle Sam owed him some back pay which he wanted, and opening the letters he took out the money, some hundreds of dollars, and told me to keep my own spare change as he never robbed a poor man, as he took me ter be."

"As bad luck would have it jist then he spied the sparkler I wore in my scarf and said he admired jewels greatly and that he noticed its

twin on my hand, and would borrow them if they were real."

"I told him they was glass, and he asked me my name."

"I said it was Diamond Dan, when I should have kept my mouth shut, for he told me he had heard of me and that settled it as to the diamonds being real stones, or glass."

"Then he said that he would borrow them, but if I attended his hanging, then I could claim them and he would back me up in the claim."

"And he took them?"

"He did for a fact, and put them on, while it took all the spare change I had laid up to buy these I has got, for I will wear diamonds, Dashing Charlie, that being my softness, and we all has a soft spot, yer knows."

"Yes, Dan, I guess we have; but did the outlaw let you go then?"

"No, he rode along with me for several miles, and then told me good-by, and so I had a good look at him."

"True, yet may be mistaken in the man."

"Maybe, yes, but I hain't, for didn't yer notice that this gent wore a diamond in his scarf and its twin on his left little finger?"

"Now you speak of it, I did notice them, Dan."

"Well, them is my diamonds, dead sure."

"By Jove, Dan, you may be right, after all."

"I is dead sure I is right, pard."

"Well, we will wait for him at Blue Mound, and take him on to the fort and be sure."

"That we will; but I owes him my life, and he can go free for all I care now, diamonds and all."

Night came on soon after, but the two scouts held on until they reached Blue Mound, and there went into camp.

It was a sugar loaf-shaped hill, around the base of which wound a stream; and being well wooded, and with plenty of grass, it was a good camping-place, while a view of the surrounding country could be had for miles about it.

Dashing Charlie knew that the Indians had in their retreat crossed the stream near the mound, while the band retreating from the fort had done the same, meeting there.

If pursued by the troops their trail would be seen also, and Dashing Charlie would know whether they had gone on after the red-skins, or had retraced their way to the fort, and this is what he wished to find out.

When dawn came the two scouts were up and examining the trails.

The two trails left by the Indians had met at the ford, as he expected, and there were the iron-shod hoofs of the cavalry following those that had come from the fort.

The tracks showed that they had gone on in the night by Blue Mound, and to his great regret Dashing Charlie discovered, by reading the trails, that the Indians retreating from the settlement had passed along after the soldiers."

"Dan?"

"Yes, Charlie."

"Your horse is not near so fresh as mine, so you remain in camp here to wait for the Mounted Tramp, and I will push on, flanking the red-skins, to give the alarm to the troops, for they do not know of the attack on the settlement and that they have a larger force of red-skins in their rear than is before them—a very important thing for them; so I must lose no time, Dan. Good-by," and Dashing Charlie was off at a gallop.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HEMMED IN.

THE more Dashing Charlie thought over the situation the troops were in, the more he became alarmed and urged on his horse.

His knowledge of the country enabled him to take short cuts here and there which saved him many miles, and which a force of retreating Indians, burdened with their dead and wounded, and soldiers in pursuit, would not be likely to take.

He had examined the trail of the soldiers and set them down as composed of three troops of cavalry, or about a hundred and fifty men.

Pressing on in pursuit of the hostiles who had retreated from the fort, after their attack and repulse, they would not have noticed the branching off of the force that went to the settlement, as they had gone by where the two bands parted company when it was night, and their tracks, therefore, would not be discovered.

In his desire to reach the soldiers in time to serve them, Charlie Emmett, though ever merciful to a dumb beast, did not now spare Dan's horse, but urged him to the utmost.

When he came to a hill, he would spring to the ground and walk up or down it, and he gave the straining animal a few swallows of water at each stream he crossed.

He took advantage of every short cut that offered, and at last felt that he was coming to a position where he would either ride out ahead of the soldiers or come in close behind them.

His plan was to immediately branch off with them, making all speed possible, and thus flank the red-skins coming from the settlement and get in their rear, so that they could not be cut off, at the same time sending a courier to the fort for a reserve force.

At last Dashing Charlie reached the trail, and on foot, for his horse was used up and had to be led to rest him.

He glanced at the trail and was glad to see that the Indians alone had passed, and was convinced that they were but a very short distance away.

As it was some miles back to where the soldiers could find a trail to branch off to flank those in their rear, Dashing Charlie set off on the back track, certain that he would not have far to go before meeting the troopers.

His now tired-out horse he was compelled to spell, and, pausing in a thick cover of wild grass, the poor beast at once sunk to the ground.

"Poor fellow!" said Charlie, pityingly—a sympathy the intelligent brute seemed to understand, for it uttered a low whicker and threw its neck out at full length upon the cool grass.

There he was permitted to lie for a full twenty minutes, precious minutes they were to the anxious scout; but it seemed to the impatient Charlie a death-warrant to tarry longer; so he was about to command the horse to get up, when his keen eyes discovered a horseman out on the plains not a half-mile away.

Was it friend or foe? Could it be that mysterious Lone Rider, again on the trail? Charlie must know.

Down under cover as he was, he would wait and see; so, motioning his horse to lie still, the fort scout gazed out through the grass for a full five minutes' scrutiny of the approaching man.

Then his face lighted up with a smile. It was Kit Kirby, the scout, whom he had sent to the fort to report the coming of the Indians.

Charlie now at once aroused his rested horse, and advancing from his cover started forward.

Kit, at first startled by this sudden appearance of a man on his trail, almost at a glance recognized his chief and hastened toward him.

"Ho, Kit! where is the command?" called out Dashing Charlie as he came within hailing distance.

"Coming on slowly half a mile back, Dashing Charlie, and about used up."

"But I'm awful glad to see you, for I didn't know what had become of you."

"Have been over to the settlement fighting off a larger band than you are following, and who are close on you now."

"Oh, Lord, Charlie! that is hard, for our horses are about played out and the men are clean gone with tired. What shall we do?"

"That is why I cut ahead to give you the warning. But, Kit, what force have you?"

"Three troops."

"Who is in command?"

"Captain Abner DeLong."

"The very man for a tight place."

"Indeed he is," averred Kit Kirby, earnestly.

"And an officer who does not think he knows it all, but is willing to take advice from a scout."

"He was only going about this far, Charlie, before turning back, for he thought he would have to show a determined pursuit, as the Indians were hard to drive; but we did not know of those who had gone to the settlement, and that we had a large force in our rear."

"Here comes the head of the column now."

As Kit Kirby spoke there came in sight four scouts riding abreast.

Behind them rode Captain DeLong, a couple of young officers, one of whom was Lieutenant Wainwright, and a bugler and an orderly.

Behind these came the first troop, the others following in slow marching order and well closed up.

Dashing Charlie was quickly recognized and Captain DeLong hastened forward and said pleasantly:

"Ho, Dashing Charlie, I am glad to see you."

"What good breeze blew you here ahead of us?"

In a few words Dashing Charlie explained the exact situation, from his going with the Mounted Tramp and Diamond Dan to warn the settlements, and how severely the Indians had been punished, adding:

"But they are four times your force, Captain DeLong, and coming on in your rear, and I rode to head you off that you might at once march off the trail and flank to their rear with all haste, for it will not do to be caught between two bands, both your superior in numbers."

"No, indeed, Charlie, it would not do if it could be helped; but in spite of your hard ride to save us, it is too late to act, for hark!"

As the captain spoke the yells of the red-skins in their rear told that they knew that they had their foes hemmed in and at their mercy.

CHAPTER XIX.

SOLDIERS AT BAY.

CAPTAIN DELONG was a skillful soldier, a brave man and one who had had considerable experience in fighting Indians.

He saw at a glance the very dangerous situation in which he was placed, and was quick to do all he could to extricate his command, as best he could from the peril they were obliged to face.

Had he pursued the Indians by daylight past the place where the bands had divided, the main force to go to attack the settlement, his scouts would have at once discovered the dividing of the red-skins.

But with the trail passed over on the march down to the fort, and then returning over it, no one would have been able to tell that all had not gone back.

The captain knew that Dashing Charlie had done all in his power to warn him, as soon as he could do so, and more than most men could have accomplished; but the fact was before them to face that there was a large force in his rear, a smaller one in his front, and with tired out horses and men and some wounded soldiers to look after, he had no chance of retreat, or flight by a flank movement.

His only plan therefore was to stand at bay, as the Indians were already crowding forward to the attack, and he said:

"Do you know of any good place ahead, Dashing Charlie, where we can make a stand?"

"Yes, sir, where we crossed a range, half a mile ahead, sir."

"The trail leads up a steep hill and down it, and there is a spring of water among the rocks, with grass enough to hold out a couple of days at least."

"I noticed the place as I turned into the trail."

"All right, I'll halt two troops to retreat fighting, while the third moves on with the outfit and takes up position."

"Let me go ahead, sir, with a few men, or the first shots will bring the force in advance of us back again, for they will understand the situation."

"Take your scouts, then, and a dozen men, and do not delay in selecting the best ground," said the captain.

And he at once dismounted two of the troops as skirmishers, while the other advanced with the horses and wounded men toward the position where a stand was to be made.

Fortunately the Indians in advance were not in heavy force, and this gave good time for the soldiers to retreat before the others came up, and they did so slowly, firing as they saw a chance to bring down a foe.

Every man realized his position, that the ammunition must not be wasted, and that now they were to stand at bay in a fight for life.

Dashing Charlie meanwhile had ridden rapidly to the position he had noted.

It was where the trail ran over a rocky ridge with heavy boulders scattered about and a few trees here and there.

A spring with copious supply of water was near the summit, and grass grew plentifully about between the rocks.

Taking in the position with skillful eye, Dashing Charlie saw that the men could roll the boulders into place so as to form a breastwork encircling some couple of acres, while the rocks below could be sent rolling down the steep hillside so as to prevent a cover for the red-skins.

On the summit the boulders were so large that they would be a shelter for the horses, and the line of rocky breastworks would protect the men.

He mapped out his plan of defense and set his men to work removing the rocks, gathering wood, and getting all in readiness as best he could.

The wounded and the troop guarding them soon after arrived, and, explaining the situation to Captain Armstrong who was in command, that officer at once ordered his men to work moving the rocks.

The firing from the trail grew louder and hotter each moment, and soon the fighting soldiers came into view, the Indians pressing them.

They hurled back a rush of the red-skins as they neared the position, and then another of the troops withdrew to aid their fellows in getting the rocks into position, while one was sufficient to hold the red-skins at bay until their whole force should arrive.

Seeing how splendidly the soldiers were fortifying themselves, the red-skins tried to hasten on their whole force, and a wild yell of triumph went up as they saw that their pale-face foes had also to turn and meet the Indians who had come back on the trail upon hearing the firing.

But the tired troopers had worked with such a will that they had their horses sheltered, the wounded in a secure spot and the rocky breastwork completely surrounding their temporary fort.

But while a third of their number held the position as a skirmish line, the others carried rocks to make the position still stronger.

"How long will your provisions last, sir?" asked Dashing Charlie of Captain DeLong.

"Three days."

"Had I not best make a dash, sir, on the freshest horse you have, to get aid, for this force of red-skins will not retreat until driven off?"

"You are right, Dashing Charlie; but see, we are entirely surrounded, and to get out is impossible," and Captain DeLong pointed to the encircling line of red-skins.

"True, sir, I will have to wait until night

and then slip through them, stealing one of their horses to make the ride on to the fort."

"But can you do it?"

"Yes, sir, I can," was the confident reply of Dashing Charlie.

CHAPTER XX.

THE COUNCIL OF WAR.

THE Indians, finding that they could not make a rush upon so strong a position as the soldiers had intrenched themselves in, when it was daylight, drew off with their usual cunning until night should come and they could accomplish their purpose under cover of the darkness.

They would also have a chance of holding a council of war with the chiefs of the other force which had turned back upon the trail, and meanwhile their braves could have a rest which they greatly needed.

This respite was greatly relished by the soldiers, too, for it gave Captain DeLong a chance to organize his command thoroughly.

One-half the men were left in position on duty, and to further strengthen their works as best they could, while the other half were called off to the summit to rest.

A late dinner was gotten, and the horses were allowed to graze among the rocks for a while and after being watered were led to their shelter among the heavy boulders on top of the ridge.

The surgeon looked after the wounded, blankets were spread, the canteens filled with water, the carbines and revolvers cleaned and all gotten ready for a night fight.

Dashing Charlie ordered his scouts to rest, so as to go out just at nightfall and take position so as to give warning of an attack, and then he was called to a council with the officers.

The captain commanding, Lieutenant Wainwright, his aide, and the officers of the troops were all there and all felt the seriousness of their situation.

"So you think you can make your way through the Indian circle to-night, Dashing Charlie?" said Captain DeLong, after telling the scout to take a seat near him.

"Oh, yes, sir."

"They have completely surrounded the position, as you see."

"Yes, sir; I have been reconnoitering from every side and they have us pretty well encircled, I admit."

"Then how can you get out?"

"Well, sir, there is one place down the ridge where I do not think they have posted any one, as they will expect us to send out a man mounted, if we send any."

"The boulders there are too wild and rough for any horse to go that way, so I will take that trail out."

"Yet they may have braves near."

"They doubtless have, Captain DeLong, but I will go as a brave myself."

"Ah, yes, you speak their language perfectly I know."

"Yes, sir, and have an Indian rig and paints in my saddle-pocket, so I can play Injun, too."

"I dislike to see you take that risk, Emmet."

"The risk will be just as great to remain here, sir, with no help coming," was the significant reply of the scout.

"Very true," said Captain Armstrong, and the faces of all showed that they felt that Dashing Charlie had struck the keynote of the situation exactly as it was.

"They can ill spare men from the fort, too, at this time," Captain DeLong said.

"They can spare them better, sir, than to spare the force under your command."

"Very true, Dashing Charlie."

"You certainly have a very dead certain way of putting things," said Captain DeLong with a laugh.

"He talks as he shoots," was Lieutenant Wainwright's remark.

"How long will it take you to reach the fort, Dashing Charlie?"

"If I can get a good horse, sir, and I'll take one from the force you were pursuing, I should reach there early to-morrow morning."

"Well, we can stand them off without much suffering for several days at least."

"I wish you to explain to the general the exact situation, and let him send every man he can spare, for they will be needed."

"Yes, sir, I will suggest that he mounts the infantry, for he has horses enough, and sends a couple of the six-pounders, for they will strike terror to the hearts of the Indians, and I will try and lead them into position so as to give them a surprise."

"You?"

"Yes, sir."

"Surely you will not return?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I will act as guide."

"But you are tired out now?"

"No indeed, sir, I am all right."

"Now I will go and make up as an Indian, for it will be dark in less than an hour," and as Dashing Charlie rose each of the officers warmly grasped his hand in farewell, for they appreciated fully the danger he was to face.

Dashing Charlie's "make-up" would have made any actor who ever played an Indian

character upon the stage green with envy, for it was perfect.

He first blackened his hair to the hue of an Indian's, and then plaited into it here and there pieces of red flannel, while an eagle-feather was attached to the scalp-lock.

His next move was to paint himself the regulation color of Indian complexion.

In this he was most careful to color his body, his arms up to the shoulders and his legs to the knees, in case he might be suspected and his white skin he looked for.

His war-paint was next put on, and this was done in a most artistic manner.

Moccasins and Indian leggings followed, then necklaces of bears' teeth and claws, a string of wampum, beads and other red-skin ornaments were added, with a blanket, hanging down *à la* Indian to perfection.

His rifle and revolvers were then carefully looked at, and with a smile Dashing Charlie said to Captain DeLong:

"My toilet is made, sir, and I'm ready for the picnic."

"Yes, and you look the red-skin from foot to scalp, Dashing Charlie."

"But it is growing dark and I suppose you are going to start."

"At once, sir."

"Good-by!"

The captain warmly grasped the scout's hand with a fervent:

"God bless you, Emmett"

CHAPTER XXI.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

DASHING CHARLIE glanced about him and saw that the shadows of night had fallen.

It was already too dark for the Indians to see him depart from the rocks, and the brave scout with a farewell wave of his hand glided silently through the crowd of soldiers who were near, and to a man they gave him an officer's salute in admiration for his courage in going forth into the night and deadly peril to save them from the death that threatened them.

The scout slipped over the rock breastworks, and, creeping close to the ground, held his way along the ridge to the mass of rugged boulders he had spoken of.

He gained them unseen by any red-skin, and made his way among them until he reached a position where he knew the Indians could not be far away.

As he was about to go on, he heard voices, and quickly he stood up near a rock just as two Indians came in sight.

It was a critical moment for Dashing Charlie, for one was a chief, the other a brave, and the former was telling the latter to go as near the works of the pale-faces as he could and see if a close watch was kept and scouts were advanced outside of the barrier.

Instantly Dashing Charlie spoke, and his knowledge of the Sioux tongue was perfect:

"The Red Crow has been near the pale-face fort, and they are asleep."

He had come across a dying red-skin at the settlement who had been singing his death-song and spoke of himself as the Red Crow, and so he had taken his name.

"The Red Crow is brave and speaks well."

"If the pale-faces sleep now, they will never awake," said the chief, and he passed on with the warrior, whom the scout heard call him Flying Dog.

"I wish I could put you to sleep, old Flying Dog, for I know you well by name as the most ornery Injun in the outfit."

"But just now I'll have to let you go," muttered the scout, and he went on his way once more, feeling more confidence after having passed through the ordeal he had, and knowing that he could pass as Red Crow and give old Flying Dog as his authority for anything he might do, if stopped and questioned.

He passed near a group of a dozen red-skins, and not one addressed him, and again his spirits rose.

Picking his way as he went, and bearing to the left, he sought to get to the rear of the band which the soldiers had been pursuing.

He had two reasons for this, as in that direction was a canyon which he could pass through and make a nearer cut than to have to ride all the way around the besieging red-skin circle, and also on account of the ponies of this band being fresher than those which had made the longer ride to the settlements and the more rapid retreat.

He was anxious to get the best horse he could, one that would stand him on the long ride.

"If I could only run upon the Mounted Tramp's horse, Black Diamond."

"But he is with the outfit that attacked the settlement," he said to himself.

As he got further away from the soldiers' position he saw red-skins by the score, but he was on the watch to avoid them all he could and managed to do so.

At last he passed through the line and knew that the ponies must be in the valley near the canyon referred to.

But just then he met a chief and a dozen braves.

To avoid them was impossible, so he strode on until the chief called out:

"The braves needed to guard the ponies are on duty."

"Why does another warrior go to the rear?"

"The Red Crow obeys the orders of the Flying Dog," responded Dashing Charlie.

And the answer came promptly:

"Let the Red Crow do as the Flying Dog has told him."

Then the chief and the braves with him passed on, while Dashing Charlie did the same, a great sigh of relief coming from his lips at his escape.

The words of the chief told him that about all the Indians that could be spared from guarding the ponies were needed at the front, and this meant an attack upon the soldiers' position very soon.

"I hope they can beat them off, but they have a large force to fight," said the scout as he continued on his way.

Sooner than he expected to, he ran upon the herd of ponies and came face to face with a guard.

"The great chief, Flying Dog, has sent the Red Crow for the best pony he has in the corral," said Dashing Charlie, when he saw that he could not avoid the red-skin sentinel.

"The Red Crow can see, for he has eyes," was the answer.

And Dashing Charlie passed on among the ponies, for the attack could not be made on horseback, so the Indians had corraled their ponies until needed.

From horse to horse went the scout in his search, and, in spite of his peril he was not hurried, quietly searching as well as he could in the darkness, for a pony that he thought would suit his purpose.

At last he found one—a large, strongly-built mustang, and taking the saddle and bridle from the near stake-pin, he soon had him ready, mounted, and rode away past the Indian sentinel he had before seen.

"The gantlet is run, now for the canyon!" he said, and he was started upon his long ride for succor.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RIDE FOR LIFE.

JUST as Dashing Charlie was beginning to congratulate himself that all personal danger was over, for he was entering the canyon, a form suddenly arose before him, as though out of the ground.

That it was an Indian the scout knew, and he could have readily dropped him with a shot.

But that would have given the alarm and shown that some one had escaped to go after help, and that was just what Dashing Charlie wished to avoid above all things.

Besides this desire he might find that there were many more red-skins in the canyon, or enough to give him trouble at least.

He must therefore accomplish by strategy what he wished to do, as he had done in the several cases before when called upon for nerve.

"Who is the brave stationed here?" he asked in a commanding tone before the other had spoken.

"The Panther, of the Chief Man-Killer's band."

Dashing Charlie recalled that the Man-Killer was the name of the chief whose life had been saved by the Mounted Tramp, and he said quickly:

"The Red Crow heard that the good chief Man-Killer was slain by the pale-faces at the settlement."

"The Man-Killer was wounded, but escaped."

"He lies in the camp on the trail, but sent the Panther here to guard the canyon."

"The Flying Dog has sent the Red Crow to call the braves at the fort beyond the canyon," said the scout.

"The Red Crow cannot go, for the Panther has his orders from his chief."

"Will the Panther go with the Red Crow to the other end of the canyon to call the braves there to join in the attack?"

"The Panther did not hear that there were braves there."

"Yes, they were sent around the ridge, but are wanted now."

"The Panther will go with the Red Crow," was the answer, and he started down the canyon.

Dashing Charlie rode by his side and waited until the other end of the canyon was reached, when suddenly his revolver fell with stunning force upon the head of the unsuspecting Indian, who dropped without a groan to the ground.

"It was a pity to have to strike a man like an assassin, but too much depends upon the result to be particular now about one life."

Dismounting, Dashing Charlie threw the body across the back of the horse and led him rapidly on down the canyon, at the mouth of which rushed a torrent.

"His body must not be found," muttered the scout, and he threw it headlong into the stream, which whirled it rapidly away.

"One hour after nightfall, and I am safely started and two miles from the troopers."

"So far, good."

"Now to make this Indian pony fly."

So mused the scout, and mounting he rode rapidly on his way, making a cut down the valley which he knew would bring him out upon the trail the soldiers and Indians had followed many miles from where the besieged and besiegers then were.

The horse he had so carefully selected he found was a good one, and he seemed comparatively fresh, answering to the call to go most willingly.

It was an hour after midnight when he neared Blue Mound, for he had made up his mind very wisely to swerve a few miles from his course and go that way, as it enabled him to press the horse he rode harder, and he could then get the animal ridden by Diamond Dick, which would be fresh and could be shoved with all speed to the fort.

"Ho, who comes?"

The challenge came from the dark depths of the Blue Mound, showing that if Diamond Dick was asleep he slept with one eye open, and was fully on the alert.

"Wide awake, Dan, I see," answered the scout.

"Dashing Charlie!"

"Oh yes, I heard your horse's hoof-strokes and they woke me," was the answer.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, the Mounted Tramp has not come; but what's up, Chief Charlie?"

"I want some supper, and then I'll take your horse for a hard run to the fort, Dan, as Captain DeLong and his men are corraled by the Indians and it will be chances if they can stand them off until I get help, for the red-skins think they've got them sure."

"That's bad."

"Yes, and I wish you, as soon as my horse is rested, to go toward the settlement and ask Colonel Knight to come on here with all the soldiers he can bring, for they will be needed, and I guess we can strike here together."

"I think so, Charlie; but what in thunder is the matter?"

"Has yer tanned red-skin out and outer?" and Diamond Dan gazed at the chief of scouts as he now stood near him.

"No, I am a pale-face now, but I did turn Injun to get out of the corral."

"Have you anything cooked I can eat?"

"Sure; I never goes without a ration ready," and Diamond Dan placed before Dashing Charlie the contents of his larder, who ate rapidly while his companion set to work getting his horse ready for him.

By the time Dashing Charlie finished his supper the horse was ready and Diamond Dan said:

"I am to go on to the settlement?"

"Yes, after the horse has had several hours' rest, and you can push the settlers back here as rapidly as possible, for I shall lead the soldiers on the return at a pace that will kill."

"All right, Chief Charlie; but about the Mounted Tramp?"

"If you see him, well and good; but if not, never mind now, for the soldiers must be saved at all hazards."

"Good-by," and leaping into his saddle, Dashing Charlie was off on his ride of rescue to the fort.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN APPEAL.

COLONEL KNIGHT, it will be remembered, was on the way back to the settlement with the body of men under him who had so hotly pursued the flying red-skins and given such a good account of their pursuit, as the trail was evidence of.

He had camped at sunset for the night, and to allow the stragglers of his command to overtake him, while at the same time he wished to preserve a barrier between the settlement and any band of red-skins that might in desperation attempt to dash back again and seek revenge.

The rest to his horses and men, by his encamping served them well, while in twos and threes the stragglers dropped in, each having their story to tell of the chase.

When he was preparing to start homeward, a horseman was seen coming toward the camp at a rapid gallop, and some of the settlers said that it was the man who called himself the Mounted Tramp.

Up to where Colonel Knight stood the horseman dashed, and as he threw himself from his horse he said:

"Pardon me, Colonel Knight, but I had started to the fort for aid when I happened to think that you would be glad to do a turn for the soldiers, which they had often done for the settlers, that is to go to their rescue, and so I came here to make an appeal to you which I trust will not be in vain."

"If I can be of any service, sir, your appeal shall not be fruitless."

"What is it that you wish of us?" said the colonel.

"The situation is just this, sir:

"You have given up the pursuit of the Indians, but had you kept on you would have discovered that the soldiers from the fort had followed the band they were chasing up into the Indian country."

"They had no means of knowing that those they were in pursuit of were not the entire force, as they passed at night the trail where those who attacked the settlement branched off."

"I see, sir."

"The result is that the troopers, not a very large number, have the Indians you repulsed in their rear, and they will thus be caught between two forces, either of which greatly outnumber them."

"By Heaven! but this is the truth, and it looks very bad for the troopers, does it not?"

"It does indeed, sir, and that was why I came here to ask you to go to their aid, for coming up in the rear as you will, if the Indians have brought the soldiers to bay, you can stampede them and thus save many valuable lives, for you must have all of a hundred men with you," and the Mounted Tramp glanced over the camp.

"I have a hundred and twenty men, sir."

"And both horses and men are well rested, sir, so I hope you will allow me to guide you to the rescue, as I know the country well, and can shorten the trail by cutting off a number of miles."

"I will go with you, yes, and at once," said the colonel.

And he turned to have a talk with several of the settlers who motioned to him.

After some minutes spent in earnest conversation, the colonel said:

"See here, Mr. Rockwell, I have perfect faith in you, but ever since the charge of Loudon that you were Black Horse Bill, some of the men have felt very suspicious of you, and a few now assert that you only wish to lead us into a trap."

"They are either fools or cowards, Colonel Knight, for I have certainly shown my willingness to aid you by giving the alarm of the Indian raid upon the settlement."

And the Mounted Tramp spoke with indignation in look and tone.

"So I think, my friend, and I am willing to trust you."

"Where is Dashing Charlie?" now asked one of those who had spoken to the colonel against the Mounted Tramp.

"He rode on to catch up with the soldiers, and must make the same discovery that I have done, and of course he will ride for aid at once to the fort."

"I was to follow him as soon as I could get a horse, and he was to wait for me at Blue Mound, or have his companion, Diamond Dan, to wait for me if he went on."

"Well, gentlemen, I say go on with this man as guide, for he certainly has befriended us, and even if he be Black Horse Bill, he has done that which should win our regard and admiration."

"Blood is thicker than water, it is said, and if he is the outlaw chief and robs our coaches and our homes, he is not one to let the red-skins do it, and this he has proven, I say, even if he be the man Loudon claimed that he was."

"So I for one say go to the aid of the soldiers under his guidance."

"Who will follow me?"

The words of Colonel Knight certainly made a good impression.

"Most all of the settlers were impressed with the truth of what he said about the Mounted Tramp, though there were a few who held back and still felt suspicious of him, one remarking:

"Well, I for one don't believe in following a man into a trap."

"Me, too."

"I say the same."

"I believe Loudon was right."

"Count me out on the rescue, colonel."

So the cries went around until a dozen had spoken.

The Mounted Tramp gave them a look of contempt, and then said:

"Colonel Knight, all I can say is that you can bind me securely, go as far as Blue Mound, and if you do not find Dashing Charlie or Diamond Dan there, return to the settlement, and if you can prove that I am Black Horse Bill, hang me!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE GUIDE AND THE SCOUT.

THE bold offer of the Mounted Tramp, to go as a prisoner of the settlers to Blue Mound, and if he was not proven to have spoken truly about the danger of the troopers, that, if they could prove that he was Black Horse Bill they might hang him, had its effect with all who heard him utter the words, with perhaps the exception of two or three who still held out against allowing him to be the guide.

"I tell you, men, that I shall trust this scout, and those who will accompany me to the rescue can at once prepare for the march, for there is no time to lose," said Colonel Knight.

His words were greeted with a cheer, but a number of the men said that it was best to be on the safe side and therefore that the guide should be taken at his word and be bound until they reached Blue Mound.

The Mounted Tramp at once held out his hands to be securely tied and two of the settlers bound them tightly, when, unaided, so great was his agility, he leaped into his saddle.

He rode to the front and Colonel Knight took a position by his side, while the men followed by fours.

The guide set the pace and the miles were quickly told off.

The Mounted Tramp rode the roan horse he had taken yet bought, from Dalton, and the animal seemed untiring.

For one reason and another half a dozen of the men had dropped out from going, and Colonel Knight sent back word by them of the cause of the delay in the settlers' returning.

As they rode along Colonel Knight sought to find out something about the mysterious man who was acting as guide, going to the rescue of soldiers yet a prisoner himself securely bound.

But the man would say but little, and appeared wrapped up wholly in his duty as guide.

Night came on, and there was a halt for some hour or more for supper and rest, but then on they went once more until the colonel spoke of calling another halt, when the Mounted Tramp said:

"The Blue Mound is but a few miles from here, sir, and there we can halt, for you will find water and grass in plenty, and I am sure either Dashing Charlie or Diamond Dan."

"All right, we will go on to the Blue Mound," said the colonel, and the guide pushed on the more rapidly.

Just as they neared the Blue Mound there came a loud challenge from out its dark depths:

"Halt!"

"Who comes there?"

"Friends!"

"The settlers on the war-path," answered the guide.

"Ah! is that the Mounted Tramp, for I think I recognize your voice?"

"Ay, ay, and you are Diamond Dan?"

"Yes, this is me."

"Where is Dashing Charlie?"

"Gone to the fort for sopers, for Captain DeLong and his boys is in a tight place."

"Where?"

"Up in the mountain country, and I was just starting to go after Colonel Knight and his men to give the red-skins a scare, as they may not hold out until their relief can reach them from the fort."

"This assertion, Mr. Rockwell, sets you free," said Colonel Knight, and with his own hands he unbound the guide, while Diamond Dan came up and explained the situation as he had heard it from Dashing Charlie.

The settlers were very glad then that they had come to the rescue, and as their horses needed rest they were unsaddled and staked out to feed upon the rich grass which grew on the low lands about the mound.

The men threw themselves down upon their blankets for a rest of several hours, and the camp was soon quiet.

But they were up by dawn and on the march, and several miles were made before they halted for breakfast.

Diamond Dan had joined the party, after leaving a stick in the center of the trail upon which was fastened a note for Dashing Charlie, telling of the force the settlers had, that the Mounted Tramp was the guide and had urged their coming, and the time they left the Blue Mound.

The scout also arranged it so that he could ride along with the Mounted Tramp, telling Colonel Knight that it was very important to be cautious, as the Indians might place an ambush for any party coming to the rescue of the soldiers.

As they went along together, Diamond Dan told the Mounted Tramp how he had been told to wait for his coming by Dashing Charlie, and said:

"I hears they didn't treat you jist right, pard."

"They seem determined to make me out the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill," was the answer.

"Did yer never see that individual, pard?"

"Never."

"Wal, you is as much like him as twins."

"Indeed?"

"It are a fact."

And Diamond Dan gave a sly glance at his companion.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to go on the hunt for this outlaw chief and capture him, to prove that I am not Black Horse Bill."

"Yas, that is just what you'll have ter do," said Diamond Dan, while to himself he mused:

"And when yer captures him yer'll rope in yerself, fer I is dead sart'in you is none other than Black Horse Bill, though what yer is playing yer present hand for I can't understand, though somehow yer holds trumps."

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ATTACK AND A SURPRISE.

THE settlers were most anxious to rescue the soldiers from their peril, for time and again had the settlements been protected by the gallant Boys in Blue, many of whom had lost their lives in defending the homes of the settlers from the Indians.

Now there was a chance to reciprocate the

favours by a rescue of the soldiers, and the settlers were most anxious to do so before the arrival of the relief which Dashing Charlie was sure to bring.

There was, however, much caution to be used, and the Mounted Tramp suggested to the colonel that it would not be well to hasten on and attack by daylight, but to await the coming on of night, the settlers to camp as near the Indians as they dare go while waiting for the last move upon them.

This would prevent the red-skins from discovering that their force was hardly as large as was that of the soldiers, for under cover of the darkness and by strategy they could make it appear to be a large one.

"I wish we only had a bugle, so as to cause them to believe that soldiers had come to the rescue, while a part of my men could cheer as soldiers, and then give our battle-cries."

"And this gent and me c'd give ther war-cries of Dashing Charlie's Dead-Shots and though I says so as is one of 'em, ther red-skins is as skeered o' us as they is of the devil, and more so I guess, too," said Diamond Dan.

"I can give all the bugle calls," the Mounted Tramp remarked.

"You have a bugle, then?"

"No, Colonel Knight, but I happen to possess a talent of imitation, and I believe you will admit that you cannot tell my bugle calls from the real instrument."

"Then we are all right, and can make the red-skins believe we are in large force."

"But how far are they from here now, do you think?"

"From what Dashing Charlie told me, some twelve miles I should say, sir," answered Diamond Dan.

"With your permission, sir, it would be well for Diamond Dan and myself to ride on ahead and reconnoiter the position, for one of us can come back and report, while we will be better acquainted with leading the men into position for a surprise, for that will be a great deal in our favor."

"So says I, pard," Diamond Dan remarked, and the two went on ahead, after having an understanding with the colonel that they would mark a camping-place to wait until nightfall.

The settlers continued slowly on for some ten miles, when in the afternoon they came to a stick in the trail and a slip of paper in the fork of it.

Upon the paper was written in a bold hand:

"Camp in the valley to the right, and do not scatter."

"The red-skins are not very far away, and from our position ahead we can hear firing."

"At sunset come on and we will meet you."

"THE MOUNTED TRAMP."

The settlers waited impatiently for the coming of night, and when the sun went down, each man stood by the side of his horse ready to mount.

The order was given, and once more the advance was begun.

They had gone perhaps a couple of miles when they came upon a horseman awaiting them in the trail.

It was Diamond Dan.

"Where is the Mounted Tramp?"

"Reconnoitering right up to the Injuns' line, and yer hears how quiet it be!"

"Yes."

"That means deviltry, for the Injuns has got the whole force ready on this side for a rush, and it's my opinion, ef we wasn't here this night, the soldiers would go under."

"And the Tramp is not far away?"

"Colonel, he are a dandy, for he went whar I w'dn't go, and he's about got things figgered down ter suit himself."

"Now we is ter ride on until we meets him, and then he'll place yer men in position."

Again the settlers moved on, a few yet grumbling about trusting so much in a man who was nothing but an outlaw playing some deep game of friendship for some reason they could not comprehend.

A mile further on they came upon the Mounted Tramp, and he hastily told Colonel Knight of just how the soldiers were located and the situation of the red-skins.

"The force that attacked the settlement have sent their ponies around to the rear of the soldiers' position, and all of the red-skins are on this side ready to make a dash upon the troops, and in a way that will sweep over them beyond doubt."

"Then what do you propose, sir, for us to do?"

"To attack the red-skins in the rear when they attack the soldiers— Ah! they are moving now, and there is not a moment to lose."

With this the Mounted Tramp rode to the front and the settlers followed, for now the wild yells of the red-skins were appalling as they rushed to the attack.

Next followed the volleys of the carbines, the defiant shouts of the soldiers, mingling with the yells of the Indians amid the scattering fire which they kept up as they rushed to the attack.

The flashes of the fire-arms lit up the scene and as the settlers reached a position to command a view they saw the black mass climbing

up the ridge and nearing the brave troopers with a force that was irresistible.

Then loud and clear rung out the notes of a bugle, sounding a charge, and following came the cheers, as from soldiers, followed by the war-cries of Dashing Charlie's Deadshots, and the ringing whoops of the settlers.

In an instant the dark column had halted in its rush, and as it wavered a stream of fire shot out from the hill in their rear, and the settlers poured in a deadly hail upon them, while they moved down the slope to attack at close quarters.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BESIEGED SOLDIERS.

CAPTAIN DELONG and every man in his command felt the most painful anxiety regarding the fate of the scout Dashing Charlie.

Not alone was it that their success depended upon that one brave man, but they felt a dread that he might lose his life in his daring effort to make his way through the Indian lines.

All listened most attentively for some sound to indicate his capture or death.

In either case the Indian could not refrain from giving vent to his shout of triumph, and that would tell them the truth.

But they listened in vain, to their great joy, and several hours passed away without a sound coming to their ears to indicate that the scout had come to grief.

After nightfall Kit Kirby had pushed his scouts out around the line, to note the movements of the Indians and give ample warning of an attack.

But nothing could be ascertained of the movements of the Indians, and the scouts dared not venture far away from the rock fort.

It was growing toward midnight when Kit Kirby thought he detected a moving mass coming across the valley.

It was too dark to see well, but he at once felt sure that the Indians were moving to the attack, so he at once fell back to the works and found his men had made the same discovery.

Every officer and man was awakened and took his post in silence, and every eye was strained to catch a view of the Indians creeping upon them.

"They are there, sir, and it would be a good idea to fire a volley all around the lines, sir, for it is a surround, and the flashes will show us where they are," said Kit Kirby.

The order was given on a blast of the bugle, and a hundred and fifty rifles flashed together, with one roar like that of a cannon.

The effect was electrical, for the flashes revealed the whole fort surrounded by a crouching mass of humanity, creeping upon the little fort, and the bullets tore their way into the crowded ranks of the red-skins, bringing all who were not hard hit to their feet with a yell of rage and fright.

Then came other yells, an answering fire and the red-skins made a rush up the hill to overpower their foes.

But revolvers flashed now, ringing out rapidly, and the Indian column melted under the hot fire, and fell back for a place of refuge to the valley below.

They had struck a blow which they had believed would be successful, and they had been beaten off with heavy loss.

No other attack was thought of that night, the only desire being to get their dead and wounded off the hillside.

"I will keep up a scattering fire all night, several shots a minute, to show them we are awake," said Captain DeLong, and then the men began to fire at intervals across the field.

The Indians thus worked at a disadvantage, and had all they could do to get their dead and wounded in their possession.

The morning dawned to show not a red-skin in sight, for every one had been moved from the field, and those who were besieging the soldiers kept themselves in hiding.

Later in the afternoon a column of mounted warriors was seen filing over the ridge beyond range of the guns, as though they were leaving and giving up the siege.

"It's a blind, cap'n, for they are just getting their ponies over to the other side, and trying to make us believe they have gone."

"They want us to send some men out for help, so they may catch him, and that makes me feel sure Dashing Charlie has gotten through," Kit Kirby said to Captain DeLong.

"I sincerely hope so; but we whipped them off in a general rush around the lines and I suppose they will now try another game?"

"Oh, yes, sir, to-night they will doubtless charge us at one point, perhaps not until dawn, so we will think they have gone, and they will try desperately hard to come in."

"And we must fight just as desperately hard to keep them out, Kirby, for if Dashing Charlie got through, and Heaven grant that he did, we cannot expect help before to-morrow night."

"No, sir, not before," was the answer, and both commander and scout went the rounds to see what else could be done to add to their strength.

The scouts made a move outside, but were not

fired upon, the horses were led out, watered and allowed to graze for awhile and the works were made stronger and arms looked to.

Then the day passed without an Indian being seen, and night coming on all was watchfulness again.

Some of the officers felt that they were gone, on account of the defeat they had had, but the older Indian-fighters knew better.

"They are coming, and in one column massed on this side," cried Kit Kirby bounding over the works, and just in time the warning was given, for on came the red-skins with a rush and the wildest yells.

Desperately the soldiers fought them, but all felt that it was in vain, for the red-skins had reached the wall of rocks, and in another moment would have been over by sheer force, when above the din rung the notes of a bugle, cheers were heard, the war-cries of white men, a volley of shots and the Indians were stampeded in the very instant of seeming victory.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RESCUE.

DASHING CHARLIE did not spare Diamond Dan's horse after leaving Blue Mound, but pushed on at a swift and steady gait.

He would relieve the animal when he could in going up and down the hills and over very rugged ways, while he cut across whenever it was possible to save a few miles.

As day dawned and he neared the fort, he felt glad that it was no further away, for his horse could not have stood it.

The sun rose, and it revealed the flag going up to the head of the staff, and soon after the sentinels reported Dashing Charlie coming with all speed toward the fort.

In the absence of the command in pursuit of the Indians, General Wesley had ordered that anything occurring should be reported to him, and so he was up and out upon the piazza of his quarters as the scout dashed up, his horse covered with foam and dust, his clothes travel-stained, and his face haggard.

"Pardon me, General Wesley, but a relief is at once needed for Captain DeLong's command, and there is not a moment to lose, as they are all of sixty miles from here," said Dashing Charlie quickly and without waiting for the general to speak.

General Wesley knew the scout so well that he at once called to his adjutant and ordered a troop of cavalry and two companies of infantry, the latter to go mounted, to prepare at once for the trail.

"Pardon me, sir, but a couple of light guns would have a splendid effect, for the Indians are in heavy force."

"I sent Diamond Dan to raise a force in the settlement, and they are to meet us at Blue Mound."

"You have done well, Dashing Charlie, and I will at once order the two light guns and rations for a ten days' trail."

And the general gave the necessary orders, adding:

"The force must leave the fort within an hour."

Then, turning to Dashing Charlie, he said:

"Now, Emmett, I will hear what you have to report, and you look as though you had been pretty severely tried."

"I am only tired, sir, but on the march back I can sleep in my saddle."

"You surely do not wish to go back with the command?"

"Oh yes, sir, for I know just how to guide them the quickest way."

"Then tell me what you can and then get breakfast and a fresh horse, and I shall remember your most valuable services."

Dashing Charlie at once told the story of his adventures, since leaving the general on the way to the fort with his party, and how he and Diamond Dan had been saved by the Mounted Tramp.

"And the settlers said that the man was Black Horse Bill, the outlaw, did they?"

"One settler asserted it, sir, and I have told you how he kept it up, in spite of all that the Mounted Tramp had done, and was doing, until he lost his life."

"That was a strange duel, Emmett."

"Yes, sir, but one that had to happen," and what followed, up to his sending Diamond Dan to the settlement for aid, the scout made known.

"You took big chances, Emmett, in masquerading as an Indian to pass through the lines."

"Oh no, sir, for I speak the language perfectly and know their ways; but I thought when I halted for breakfast I would never get the paint off, and look like a white man again."

"I am afraid you will not be able to stand this strain upon you, Emmett."

"Oh yes, sir, I am all right, for I am only in need of sleep; but if I see the Mounted Tramp, am I to bring him to the fort with me?"

"Certainly, if he wishes to come, but not otherwise."

"If the man is Black Horse Bill, his services the past few days have won for him a pardon, that is certain."

"Tell him I wish to see him, and perhaps we

can then get at the bottom of this mystery surrounding him."

Dashing Charlie now went to his quarters, refreshed himself with a bath, ate his breakfast, and, mounting his best horse, was ready to start again as guide when the troops assembled for the march.

The best men, a hundred and forty all told, with two light guns, and the best horses, had been selected for the long and rapid ride, while those remaining at the fort had assembled to cheer their comrades at their departure.

The ladies and children were out in full force and as Dashing Charlie, whose adventures had already become known in some mysterious way, rode into view he was received with the wildest of cheers.

"Bring that handsome and mysterious man, the Mounted Tramp, back with you, Mr. Emmett," called out Gabrielle Garland as Dashing Charlie rode near to her.

The scout doffed his sombrero and said:

"I will try and obey your orders, Miss Garland, but he may not be so easily persuaded by me."

The general gave the command to start, the bugle rung out clearly and the relief had started upon its work of rescue.

Away they went at a steady trot, Dashing Charlie ahead setting the pace, until Captain Emory in command called to him to ride by his side and tell him just what the situation of affairs was.

Leaving the half-dozen scouts under his command to keep on ahead, Dashing Charlie obeyed, giving the captain all the information in his power.

Arriving at Blue Mound he found the note left there by Diamond Dan, and reading it he handed it over to Captain Emory and the command was moved rapidly on once more.

After short halts, just before dawn they came within the sound of heavy firing, and Dashing Charlie cried:

"The Indians have gotten reinforcements from their village and have the settlers also besieged."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FLYING ARROW.

JUST in the very instant of time the settlers had arrived upon the scene, and the Indians, disheartened, surprised and terrified, had taken flight, forced to leave their dead and wounded upon the field.

Down the slope the settlers had ridden, pushing the retreat, and led by the Mounted Tramp, making a dash to stampede the corralled ponies.

The soldiers bridled and saddled their horses and mounting in haste, led by Captain DeLong, rode out also to give pursuit.

But suddenly the settlers were warned back by a loud command from the darkness ahead, calling out in a voice that reached every ear:

"The red-skins are rallying!"

"Back to the hill, for they will attack, and they outnumber you!"

"It is the voice of the Mounted Tramp, and I will heed the warning," cried Colonel Knight, and he held a hurried consultation with Captain DeLong.

Just then Diamond Dan rode up and said that it had been the Mounted Tramp who had given the warning, and that he had tried to find him in the darkness, but had failed.

He had, however, seen enough to urge the commander to retreat with his force to the hill, and throw out a line of skirmishers encircling the hill.

The scouts were to advance still further, and as the horses needed food, they were to feed in the valley near the ridge, and be ready to run back at the first alarm.

Captain DeLong took command of the entire force, and to retreat would be madness in the face of an enraged foe, so they would hold their own and await the coming of help from the fort.

With such numbers they could then bid defiance to the Indians, no matter how strong they were.

So the night passed away, the men getting what rest they could, and the horses having an all night feed of it, which would make them all right for a day or so at least.

The force strengthened the works as best they could, the wounded were taken care of, and there were a score of them, while the half-dozen men who had been slain were gathered together and decently buried.

The Indian wounded were also looked after, while the dead were left lying where they had fallen, for there were too many to bury readily, and the captain wished to give his men all the rest he could.

As the settlers had gotten out of rations, provisions were scarce and the men had to go upon short allowance, while the ammunition had to be economized also.

Colonel Knight had stationed his men upon one side of the ridge, the soldiers taking the other, and no more dread of holding the fort was felt, at least if they were not starved out.

The colonel had told Captain DeLong how it was that they had come to his aid, and as it was now known that Dashing Charlie had escaped, n

safety no dread was felt but that relief would soon come to them from the fort.

"The men, or rather a few of them, are unreasonable about this man whom they call the Mounted Tramp, Captain DeLong, in spite of all that he has done for us, for they will insist that he is the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill," said the settler colonel.

"Yes, the belief seems to be general that he is the outlaw, Black Horse Bill, but I admit he has done good service enough to wash out a multitude of sins.

"If he had not given that warning last night, I believe we would have run into an ambush, for the Indians have no more retreated than we have."

"That is my opinion, Captain DeLong, and yet we dare not push a force far enough out from the fort to find out."

"I would like to see this Mounted Tramp again, and ask him what his opinion is.

"Where is he?"

"My men reported that he did not come in with them, sir."

"Nor did I hear of his coming in with the soldiers."

"In fact I have not heard of or seen him since his warning my command last night."

"I will have inquiry made about him."

Inquiry was made but neither settler or soldier had seen or heard of him since the flight of the night before.

A man was sent out to make the rounds of the scouts and see if he was with them or they knew aught about him.

In an hour he came back and reported that he had not been seen by any of the scouts and that Diamond Dan had reported that it was his belief that the Mounted Tramp had been either captured or killed, for when he gave the warning he must have been within the very midst of the Indian lines.

Toward nightfall the scouts were called in and reported that they were confident that the red-skins were gone, though Diamond Dan leaned to the belief that they had not gone, but were playing some cunning game.

Just after midnight fell there suddenly came a whirring sound in the air, and into the very midst of the group of officers, striking Lieutenant Wainwright upon the arm, came a flying arrow.

"Ha, an attack!" arose the cry, and men scattered to their posts of duty.

But Captain DeLong took up the arrow and said:

"This flying arrow came from no hostile hand, for see, there is a note wrapped around it."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STRANGE MISSIVE.

THE fact of the Flying Arrow coming into the camp of the soldiers was a surprise to all.

There was not the slightest doubt but that it was sent by some one friendly to them, for what else could be its mission?

The Indians might or might not have retreated, but most every one believed that they had.

Still Kit Kirby, acting as commander of the scouts in the absence of Dashing Charlie, said that the red-skins had not retreated, that they had recognized that the settlers were not in very large force, but enough to at first stampede them, and that they dared not retreat with the soldiers, and hence were playing some deep game to get their scalps along with those of the troopers under Captain DeLong.

This of course was his opinion, but Diamond Dan backed him up in it, and the other scouts too.

Captain DeLong felt the same way, as did the commander of the settlers, and their opinions were enough to see that there should be no lack of discipline and watchfulness.

The Flying Arrow, which had come into the camp so mysteriously, was picked up by Captain DeLong.

He saw that it was a well-feathered arrow, the barb taken off so as to do no harm, and about the shaft was closely wrapped and tied with horse-hair a piece of paper.

Opening this he read:

"The Indians have not retreated, though they wish you to believe so.

"They stampeded before the advance of the settlers, but met several hundred warriors coming from their village to reinforce them, so rallied and held a council of war.

"They have all of twelve hundred braves to fight you with, and are plotting to attack to-night, but at what hour is not decided.

"Feint attacks will be made all around your works, but the main force will rush on you along the top of the ridge, from the north, so keep four-fifths of your men at that point, for you will need them, as the red-skins are in a frenzy of rage and will sacrifice half their force to capture you.

"If Dashing Charlie, with his rescuers from the fort, arrive in time, you will have nothing to fear, for the red-skins do not expect further help for you and will be seized with panic.

"If I can, I will give you further information."

This was written in a tiny hand, but perfectly legible, and it had no signature.

The captain read it twice over to his officers, and asked:

"Now what do you think of that?"

"Is it not written by some white renegade in

the Indian lines, and is intended to put you off your guard as to the real point of attack?" asked an officer.

"It is written by an educated man, that is certain, be he renegade or not."

"I say it's from the Mounted Tramp, sir," Diamond Dan remarked, for he had been called in with Kit Kirby to the council.

"Why did he not sign his name then?" asked an officer.

"He may have thought that you knew it could only come from him, or forgotten to do so," Colonel Knight answered.

"I, too, believe it is from the Mounted Tramp," said Captain DeLong.

"But how could he write that note, and fire it into camp if he is a prisoner?"

"True."

"But is he a prisoner?"

"What else can he be?"

"A renegade."

"Ah!"

A dozen voices joined in this exclamation.

"It is said that he is Black Horse Bill the outlaw, so why not a renegade?"

"Gentlemen, if a renegade, I saw him fired upon by the Indians awaiting to ambush General Wesley and the party with him, and he saved us from riding into it."

"He also gave warning to the fort of the attack, and you, Colonel Knight, have said that the settlement was saved by him, and he led Dashing Charlie, and Dan here to safety."

"We soldiers would have been all dead or prisoners, but for the coming of your force, Colonel Knight, and yet you would not have come but for the man whom some here, I am sorry to say, try to make out a renegade and an outlaw."

"If he is what you say, you who condemn him, then I wish I had a few just such renegades and outlaws under my command."

"I for one, believe that the man has some hold upon the Indians, for as a prisoner he could hardly give us this warning, but that he is a renegade I do not consider for an instant, as his own acts belie the charge against him."

Captain DeLong spoke with considerable warmth and the foes of the Mounted Tramp made no reply, but Colonel Knight said:

"Then you shall act as this mysterious mis- sive directs, captain!"

"I shall, sir."

"Right you are, cap'n, if I says so who has no right ter chip in my chin-music," bluntly said Diamond Dan.

"But you have a right, Dan, as you were asked here for your opinion and I know its worth."

"What do you say, Kirby?"

"Stick by the letter, sir," was the scout's reply, and Captain DeLong responded firmly:

"I shall do so."

CHAPTER XXX.

LIKE AN APPARITION.

THERE were several of the army officers and a number of the settlers who felt that Captain DeLong was doing very wrong to take such chances as to rely upon the unsigned and strange missive he had received.

But Captain DeLong was responsible for the safety of his men, and he acted as he deemed best to protect them.

The part of the ridge indicated by the letter as the point of the main attack was just where Dashing Charlie had made his exit.

The rocks had been rolled either down the steep hillsides, or to form a breastwork, leaving the space clear back for three hundred yards where the heavy bowlders began.

Here the Indians could hide and at a given signal start for the little fort.

They could creep along upon the ground as near as they dared come, then approach until they were discovered, and with a thousand warriors making a rush as they could run, it would be an irresistible torrent of Indian humanity which, as a surprise, would rush over even equal numbers.

But if prepared against, the defenders might be able to beat them back with a withering fire.

So the men were stationed at the ridge, extending up and down the hill, and, shoulder to shoulder, with a reserve line behind them, they made a very formidable wall to dash against.

The rest of the force, one-fifth, were scattered around the works, the men being about ten feet apart, except at one place where there was a cliff some fifteen feet in height, and where for sixty feet no sentinel was supposed to be needed.

A tree had been felled here and the branches extended over the cliff, but had been lopped off so as not to extend toward the ground.

It was not very far from this cliff, amid a group of large bowlders that Captain DeLong had established his headquarter camp.

Anxious about the result he had not retired to his blankets, but, with Colonel Knight, Lieutenant Wainwright and Diamond Dan was discoursing the situation and awaiting the attack most all felt certain would come.

The scouts had been advanced slightly beyond the line of works, and half the men were awake

and on duty, the others being asleep on their blankets at their posts.

Midnight had passed an hour or more, and yet not a sound had been heard to indicate that the Indians had not all retreated when they had stampeded the night before.

In fact there were reasons for believing that the red-skins were nowhere near, for a wolf had been heard howling down the ridge. A whip-poor-will's plaintive notes were heard in another direction, and in the direction where the red-skins were supposed to have been in hiding all day, an owl was hooting for its mate.

"That is a sure sign no red-skins are about," said one of the grumblers.

"Yes, we might have been half-way home by this time, for there are no red-skins near," another remarked.

Lieutenant Wainwright said, as the words reached the ears of those about the headquarters camp:

"That would indicate that the Indians had gone."

"That is true, and they may have done so," answered Captain DeLong.

"We will, however, keep watch until broad daylight, though no wolf, owl, or bird would go near the Indians, that is certain," said Colonel Knight, while Diamond Dan inquired dryly:

"If them is raal."

"What?"

"Them sounds."

"You heard them?"

"Yas; and I has hoerd a Injun jist make a owl and a wolf ashamed of not knowing their own style o' talk, and thet may be a leetle game ter fool us, jist as it does some folks."

"I tells yer, pards, a Injun is born in ther woods, and they larns all ther cries of birds and animals, and don't yer forgit it, they is edicated in deviltry from Wayback."

"Then you think the sounds were not made by a wolf, owl, and whip-poor-will?" asked Captain DeLong, while Colonel Knight said, quickly:

"Hark!"

All listened attentively, and distinctly from along the ridge came the howl of a prairie-wolf.

It was repeated several times, and an officer said:

"That is no Indian."

But as the sound died away those near heard from down in the valley the mournful hoot of an owl.

This was answered from afar off and repeated several times.

"That is certainly an owl," said the same officer.

"Hark!"

It was Captain DeLong who uttered the the word, and all listened, while off in the opposite direction was heard the clear, plaintive call of the whip-poor-will.

"Listen to that, now, and say an Indian can do that, Dan," said the officer.

"I has listened, and I does say that a Injun can do it, and has, for they has overdid ther work."

"Yer see, them over yonder can't hear ther cry of ther whip-poor-will, and ther red-skin as is playing owl can't be heard by t'other one, and so it is with ther wolf-man."

"They is all playing deserted woods, and ther result is we gits ther cries all together, and ef Injuns hain't making 'em, then I is a liar."

"Indians are making those sounds, Diamond Dan," said a deep voice.

And all started and turned, to find the Mounted Tramp standing like an apparition before them.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MAN OF MYSTERY.

EVEN Diamond Dan and Captain DeLong started, as they heard the words and saw the Mounted Tramp before them.

He had approached unheard, and stood within a few feet of them like a phantom.

How had he gotten into the works, for if he came and challenged a sentinel he would have been accompanied by a soldier.

Captain DeLong arose quickly, as did the others, while Diamond Dan, glad to be sustained by such good authority in his assertion, said:

"Yas, pard, I knowed them was Injuns playing it on us; but how in thunder did yer git in here?"

"That is just what I would like to ask, Mr. Rockwell, but come as you may, I am glad to see you," Captain DeLong said.

"You received my note, sir?"

"Yes, for I supposed that it came from you, though there was no signature."

"That was on account of my breaking the point of my pencil, sir, and I did not wish to take the time or risk to sharpen it."

"That explains it."

"Yes, sir, for I did not think you would consider that it could have come from any one else."

"We missed you, or rather Colonel Knight did, and we supposed that you had been either killed or captured."

"I became mixed up among the Indians, sir, and so saved my life by a strategy which I need not make known."

"Finding that I could serve you by being among the Indians, I remained, and so sent my note by a flying arrow."

"Yes, but how did you get into this camp, Rockwell?"

"There is no one guarding the cliff, sir, for I noted that fact with my glass during the day, and seeing a tree fallen over it, I decided to come that way."

"But no man can scale that cliff."

"I threw my lasso up to a projected limb of the fallen tree, sir, and then drew myself up."

"When seen in camp just now I was supposed to be one of the men, and so came on here to your quarters, for I had seen you here with my glass by day."

"But, do the Indians allow you your freedom?"

"Oh, yes, sir; under existing circumstances they do," was the reply, followed quickly by the words:

"You remember my note said that I would give you other information if I could?"

"Yes."

"I decided to come and tell you in person what might be of interest to you."

"Well, I shall be glad to hear it."

"The Indians have decided to make their attack, not by the ridge, as intended, but from the valley on this side, for the darkness of the lowlands will prevent their being seen until they are nearly upon you."

"My advice then is to place your heavy force there to repel them, and, as they will come uphill, the advantage will be with you, though, if it was a surprise, with them."

"The attack will be made in about four hours—just before dawn breaks; but in case they should make it sooner, it will be well to move your men at once, and, should the change not be determined on, it would be as well to move but half your force to this side, keeping the other half guarding the ridge until the attack is begun, for it will be an easy matter to run them to either place when needed."

"As for the other men, I would leave them where they are, but a man should be placed as a sentinel upon the cliff at that old tree, and if you will call for a soldier, sir, I will place him in position there."

"I will do so at once."

And Captain DeLong ordered a soldier sent for, and, when he arrived, said:

"Go with Mr. Rockwell and obey his instructions."

The soldier saluted, and the two walked away together.

Then Captain DeLong went to the ridge position and divided his men, sending half to the point which the Mounted Tramp had said would be the place attacked.

He explained the situation to the officers in command of each position, and that they must hold themselves in readiness to rush their men to either point when called upon to do so.

Diamond Dan had meanwhile volunteered to take up position as far down the hill in front of the threatened point as he could, so as to hasten back and give an alarm, and Captain DeLong had said:

"Go, Diamond Dan, as you say, and I will ask Rockwell to take up position upon the ridge and report."

The scout departed, and Colonel Knight said:

"But where is the Mounted Tramp, captain?"

"He has not returned from placing the sentinel upon the cliff."

"But will he return?"

"What do you mean?"

"He said nothing about coming back."

"True, but surely will do so, as there is no need for his remaining with the Indians now, whatever his motive was before to do so."

"Suppose we go and see?"

The two at once went to the cliff.

There stood the soldier sentinel, but the Mounted Tramp was not visible.

"Where is Rockwell, Kane?" asked Captain DeLong.

"He went over the cliff, sir, down on his lariat, after placing me in position," was the soldier's reply, to the great surprise of Captain DeLong.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RED-SKINS' RUSH.

THE mysterious departure of the Mounted Tramp puzzled Captain DeLong more than he cared to admit even to himself.

Why had the man not spoken of going away? Why had he gone back to the Indians when he was safe within the lines of his own people?

Had his saying he would place the soldier as a sentinel been but a ruse to get away again?

These were the questions which Captain DeLong could not answer and which worried him.

What if the Indians did not intend to attack either by way of the ridge, or the valley to the north?

So thinking over the matter Captain DeLong turned to the settlers' commander and said:

"Colonel, I have faith in that man still."

"As I have, sir."

"But I yet shall be upon the safe side."

"It is best, Captain DeLong."

"I will therefore ask you to go the rounds with me."

"With pleasure, sir."

"We will notify the commanders of both forces to be ready to rush their men to any point that may be the place of attack, independent of the valley or the ridge."

"Yes, sir."

"I will notify the men to be all on the watch where the lines are thinned by removal, and they must stand ready to make a good fight, if attacked, until help comes."

"They must indeed, Captain DeLong."

"We will then take position where we can be ready to quickly discover which really is the point of attack, and which feints are made against, and then no matter which way they come we will be prepared for them."

"Yes, sir, and we must be, for if, as the Mounted Tramp asserted, they have reinforcements, we have a force to meet that will be very hard to beat off, and you know an Indian is not easily discouraged."

"No, and they have that much greater injury to avenge after defeat."

"Now let us make the rounds."

This was done and the caution and orders given, not only to the officers but to the men, so that there would be no mistake.

The captain even went out of the works and notified the scouts, telling Kit Kirby and the others of the mysterious visit of the Mounted Tramp, and his even more mysterious going away.

"What do you think of it, Diamond Dan?" asked the captain when he came to the position occupied by the scout, and which he found was dangerously far off from the works.

"I think that man is all right, cap'n."

"Why did he leave?"

"Waal, maybe if he had stayed the Injuns would have suspected him and changed their plans."

"That is so."

"I had not thought of that."

"So he wanted ter be with 'em."

"Then you think he is friendly with them?"

"Well, I won't say that, sir; but I will say as how they must be friendly with him, or he wouldn't be allowed to go about as he does."

"I do not exactly see the difference, Dan."

"Waal, cap'n, maybe they thinks he is acting squar' with them, and is their friend, while we knows he is playing it on them and is friendly ter us."

"Ah, I see; but now let me tell you to come back nearer the works, for you would have quite a run of it if they came upon you."

"I kin run like a antelope, cap'n."

"I know you are very fleet of foot, Diamond Dan, but a bullet overtakes a bird, you are aware."

"Fact, dead sart'in, sir."

"So come back nearer the works."

"All right, sir, a leetle nearer," and the scout walked back with the captain, who then continued on to the works.

He had gone the rounds, so had nothing more to do but join Colonel Knight and await developments.

Not a sound came from the surrounding valley and timber, except the occasional yelp of a coyote or the hoot of an owl as before.

"The very keeping up of those sounds, Captain DeLong, now convinces me that they are made by an Indian," said the settlers' commander.

"As they do me, for an owl would not hoot so long."

"But we are as well prepared now for an attack as we can be, so let the red devils come at their pleasure," said the plucky cavalry captain.

"So say I, sir."

"Let me see, it is now just about half an hour before the dawn will begin to break and—"

"Ha! who is that?"

The captain ended his speech abruptly as a man came bounding suddenly toward him.

It was Diamond Dan, and he said quickly, but in a whisper:

"They are coming, sir, and the Mounted Tramp war right, for they is creepin' up from the valley."

"You saw them?"

"I did, sir, and I did some creepin' myself until I got to whar I c'u'd git up and dust."

"All right, did you give the alarm to the captain of the hill force?"

"Yas, sir."

"Then make the rounds, Diamond Dan, and notify the officers and men."

The scout was off like a shot on his mission.

But hardly had two minutes passed when there arose from the valley a burst of the wildest war-cries, and in an instant a thousand Indian warriors were rushing at full speed up the hill to the attack, the leaders not a hundred yards away from the rocky breastworks.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FIGHT FOR LIFE.

THE Indian braves had showed the utmost cunning in their attack upon Captain Abner DeLong and his men, for they had formed all their plans on the other side of the fort, not a red-skin had been seen through the day, and their ponies had been removed a mile or more away, where they could not be heard, should one of them neigh, by the soldiers on the ridge.

Then, too, they had detailed squads of braves, under chiefs, to surround the place completely, and in such a way that they could make a general attack at the same instant.

Of course, these squads were only to make a feint attack, as the mass of warriors were to form in column and rush with irresistible force upon the fort.

They were to get into position soon after night-fall, and creeping near, sleep on their arms until the command came for them to attack.

The general-in-chief, as Man-Killer was wounded, was Flying Dog, and he showed himself an able commander, and was certain, in his own mind, of success.

The other chiefs, even those envious of him, admitted that the plan to conquer success could not have been better had they been the ones to originate it.

They, therefore, crept up as near as they dared to the works, for they felt that the soldiers would have scouts out to give warning in advance.

They however had not seen any scout, and when they laid down to rest one of the best of the braves was sent on alone to get as near to the works as he could, and to return if he saw any indication that the pale-faces were prepared for them.

But he did not return and it was supposed that he had not seen anything of an alarming nature, so was watching and waiting for the charge to be made.

Had they been able to have seen through the darkness however, they would have discovered that their red scout had run against a snag.

This snag was nothing more nor less than Diamond Dan, who, crouching behind a boulder, saw the Indian creeping toward him.

He watched him closely, crept around one side of the rock as he did on the other, and coming behind him dealt him a blow with his revolver which crushed in his skull.

Then he shouldered him and took him back to the rocks with the remark, as he tossed him over:

"He was nosin' around, Cap'n Todd, and run ther back o' his head ag'in' my revolver."

"I thinks they is coming pretty soon, sir."

And Diamond Dan was off again to the position he had held.

Two hours after he saw the dark moving mass, like a tide coming in, as it slowly moved up the hillside, and he sped back to give the alarm.

His coming gave the men a moment to nerve themselves for the death-struggle, and when the Indians, feeling that they were discovered, gave their wild war-cry in chorus, they were answered first with a volley of rifles and carbines, and then with ringing cheers.

The flashes of the guns around the lines revealed the fact, which the Indians had not considered, that the general attack in circle was a feint, and just where the point was that they were to storm.

By the time those in position guarding the main position had emptied their rifles the other four on the ridge had reached them and begun to pour in their fire.

The men fought with calm courage, for they knew all that depended upon them, and having emptied their rifles held them in one hand ready to club them for close quarters, while with the other they drew their revolvers and began to rattle in shots upon the advancing red-skins.

The first fire had been aimed in a measure at random, for the foe had not been seen, only picked out from the sound of their voices.

The bullets had, many of them, either passed over the heads of the Indians, or struck too low and entered the ground.

Still a number had found targets in Indian flesh and bone, yet, instead of checking those unhurt, had but nerved them the more to seek revenge.

They had rushed up the steep hill like an avalanche, and though staggered by the next volley, and temporarily halted by the fire of the second relief, had again pressed on, for those only in front had been the sufferers, and the braves in the rear were eager to grapple with their pale-face foes.

All around the line there was popping of rifles, and bullets and arrows were flying into the camp, frightening the horses terribly, for, to do this very thing fire arrows were sent flying into the corral where the animals were kept.

Breaking out in their terror, in spite of the barriers, the horses began to rear and plunge about, and with the shots and arrows still rained into the little fort by the small bands of red-skins surrounding it, and whose duty was to annoy their foes and prevent a large force from facing the column charging, men began to look each other in the face with an expression which plainly showed that all hope was leaving them.

CHAPTER XXXIV. ON TO THE RESCUE!

AGAIN was all hope over in the hearts of the brave men who were fighting against such terrible odds.

If there was despair felt it was not the despair of coward hearts, but that of brave men who sought to die fighting to the bitter end with desperation.

Captain DeLong was a hero in the fight, for though twice wounded, he still cheered on his men, exposing himself most recklessly.

The settlers' commander was also bravely urging on his men, and trying to stem the torrent of defeat.

Lieutenant Wainwright was everywhere, trying to check the frght-maddened horses and keep the men around the works cool and determined.

The fire arrows still fell in the midst of the corral, the horses rushed frantically about, the rifles roared, the revolvers rattled, stern orders rung out, and cheers answered the triumphant war-cries of the savages.

But it seemed that all the courage of the defenders was in vain, that the end was near at hand, when suddenly, above the din, again was heard the ringing notes of a bugle sounding a charge.

Loud, piercing and stirring it rung, and from the hill in the direction behind the Indian column from whence help must come to the defenders, if come it did.

A distant cheer was heard, growing louder and louder, and as the red-skins paused to listen in their mad rush upon the wall of rock so bravely defended, and from which they had twice been hurled back, then came to their ears the thunder of iron hoofs, a rumbling sound that sounded strange, and then a burst of flame back in the darkness, a rushing and shrieking of iron hurtling through the air, and then, with a clanging report, first one then another shell burst in the air just over the crowding, awaying, staggering mass of Indian braves.

There was no mistaking those sounds. They knew that what they called the "wagon guns" were upon them, and that they must be supported by a large number of soldiers.

They dared not linger there. Their wounded must be left to die, their dead must look after their dead, for they could only save themselves by flight.

Their ponies were far away and furious foes were upon their track now.

So, no longer uttering war-cries, no longer fighting, the red warriors fled from the field like shadowy phantoms, rushing around the corral of soldiers, only seeking safety in flight, and by the roughest way to throw off pursuit.

But streams of fire poured after them from the dark hillside beyond, where the mounted infantry were, and shells burst above their heads, while down the slope thundered the troopers with saber in one hand, revolver in the other, and ringing, piercing was heard the well-known and dreaded battle-cry of Dashing Charlie as he guided the cavalymen around the corral in hot pursuit.

A cheer answered the cry of the relief party, and then was heard the command of Captain DeLong to his men, to catch what horses they could, for they were already saddled and bridled for a last emergency, and follow him in the hot pursuit.

Out of the little blood-stained fort swept the troopers as fast as they could mount, mingling in the mad chase with the brave settlers until a hundred and fifty were in pursuit, besides the cavalymen, who had so timely come to the rescue.

The mounted infantry pressed rapidly on up to the fort, with the two light guns, and the latter unlimbered and sent a few more shells into the distant timber, when, for fear of injuring their own men, they had to cease firing.

But they held their position with the mounted infantry, ready to go at a call for help, should the Indians dare turn to strike back.

But there was no rally in the braves then; they had met with too severe a defeat to seek revenge then, and only sought safety in flight.

They ran like deer in their effort to reach their ponies, and many of them were fortunate enough to get to them and mount.

But so hot was the pursuit that others, to save their lives, had to dart away in the timber, the hills and among the rocks like hunted wolves, and hide or continue their flying to places of safety, leaving their camp and hundreds of ponies to fall into the hands of their foes, who had now become merciless toward those who they knew would have shown no mercy to them.

The day dawned, and the sunlight revealed the scene to view, a scene which only a brave man dared gaze upon, for in the corral, the valley, upon the hillsides and along the trails lay dead and dying men, red-skin and pale-face, while slain and wounded horses and Indian ponies also dotted the earth to show how terrible had been the conflict.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE MOUNTED TRAMP'S RIDE FOR AID.
The day was a beautiful one, for the sun

shone brightly and all nature seemed joyous and bright, while man was the sufferer, as red and white they were prostrated in death, or from wounds.

The little fort was the scene of the greatest carnage, for before it upon the steep hillside lay scores of braves who had fallen, while many who had been too badly wounded to escape had taken their own lives that they might not fall into the hands of their hated foes.

There were in the fort a dozen dead soldiers and settlers, and many more who had been more or less seriously wounded.

The surgeon of the command of Captain DeLong, one of the settlers who was a physician, and the surgeon accompanying the relief party, were all busy in a hastily-arranged hospital.

The scouts, ever tireless, under Dashing Charlie, had gone on in pursuit of the Indians, while a troop of cavalry had followed more slowly as a barrier between the camp and the foe, should they return to give battle.

Against the same emergency the troops enlarged the little fort and strengthened it, for the captain felt that a retreat could not be undertaken for several days.

The two guns were mounted in position, the infantry encamped on the hill, and the cavalry in the valley where the horses were herded to feed.

Thus the day passed away and night fell upon the scene to find the soldier dead all buried and the wounded cared for as best they could be.

The next morning saplings were cut and arranged for *travois* on which to carry the wounded back to the fort and settlement, and the Indian dead were buried decently.

Toward sunset the troop of cavalry returned from the pursuit, and reported that Dashing Charlie and his men were not far behind them, and that they had left the Indians still in full flight for their village.

They had found several Indians left on the trail by their comrades, who had fallen from wounds.

This fact alone showed that the Indians were still in a panic, and had no thought of halting for a fight before they reached their village.

The scouts came in after nightfall and Dashing Charlie went at once to headquarters to report to Captain DeLong, who was still in command, being the ranking officer.

Captain Emory was also there, with the commander of the settlers and Lieutenant Wainwright, and they were discussing the situation when Dashing Charlie arrived.

"Ah, Emmett, I am glad to see you, for I wish to have a talk with you."

"But first tell us of any report you have to make," said Captain DeLong, yet before the scout could reply, he continued:

"No, let me first tell you the deep gratitude we all feel toward you for your noble risk of life to save us, and had it not been for your going we would never have survived the battle which your relief so well turned in our favor."

"Let me say, Captain DeLong, that though I went after the relief, and they came, had it not been for the Mounted Tramp meeting us five miles away and forcing us to drive our horses to their utmost endurance, we would not have arrived just in time as we did," responded Dashing Charlie.

"Captain Emory has told me already that this strange man whom we all now know as the Mounted Tramp appeared to you on the trail, and told you that we were doomed unless a ride was made to our aid at the full speed of your horses."

"It is true, sir, for I was guiding ahead, when I heard the sound of hoofs."

"I halted, and up dashed none other than the Mounted Tramp, and seeing me he called out who he was and that he had come to hurry us on."

"I took him back to Captain Emory, and the command was pushed at once to a run, the Mounted Tramp riding on ahead."

"As we came near the edge of the timber on the hill yonder, I heard a bugle, and the men cheered, and he had sounded the charge to let the red-skins know help was at hand, as they were about to rush over your works."

"It was no bugle, for he did the same thing when we came to the rescue," said Colonel Knight.

"No bugle, sir?"

"No, he has the power to imitate the bugle to perfection, and that it was."

"Indeed?"

"It was as clear and perfect bugle-notes as I ever listened to," Captain Emory remarked.

"I heard it, too, and it was indeed perfect; but the man was in our camp that same night and warned us."

"Then he disappeared, and it must have been, fearing you would not arrive in time, that he went back to hasten on the relief, and he did it."

"Yes, and in the very instant of time, Captain DeLong," said Colonel Knight.

"But where is the Mounted Tramp now, Dashing Charlie?"

"I have not seen him, sir, since he left us in the edge of the timber and sounded those bugle-notes."

"Who has seen him?" asked the captain.

"I have not."

"Nor I."

And so the replies came from all, for no one had seen the Mounted Tramp since the battle ended, not even in the pursuit, and what had become of him not one could understand, while Captain DeLong said sadly:

"I fear that at last he has met his death."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE RETURN.

THE troops were to start back upon the following day, retreating slowly on account of their wounded, and with one gun in advance with a troop of cavalry, and a like force in the rear, the main force in the center.

It was feared that there might be an attempt of a band of Indians to ambush the command, or to rush in on the rear, as a blow of revenge, and Captain DeLong was determined to be prepared for any emergency.

He had Diamond Dan leading as guide, and Dashing Charlie in the rear, and well back.

He hoped that the chief of scouts might find some clew to the missing man, Rockwell, in whom all had now begun to feel the deepest interest.

Even the grumbling settlers had become convinced that he had told the situation truthfully regarding the Indians' attack, and had then saved all by riding to meet the relief force and hastening them on to the rescue.

The first day's march was made only twenty miles, and the second night's camp was at Blue Mound.

Then the settlers took their trail homeward on the east side of the ridge, and the troops parted with them with many a kind word and cheer.

The settlers bore their wounded with them, but at Blue Mound two of the number had died of their wounds, and three soldiers, and found their last resting place there.

The soldiers moved on their way to the fort, a courier having been dispatched to notify General Wesley of the rescue, and the results of the expedition.

Dashing Charlie, Diamond Dan and six scouts hung back in the rear, the two named hoping to find some trace of the Mounted Tramp.

It was near sunset when the returning troops came in sight of the fort, and they were greeted with the wildest enthusiasm by the garrison and all others there.

The appearance of Captain DeLong and his immediate command evidenced the ordeal through which they had passed, while the ranks, thinned by a score of dead, and half a hundred wounded men, showed that there had been hot work.

Several hundred Indian ponies had been captured, however, and the expedition could record a death-rate among the Indians about man for man of the troops sent out, while they had certainly given the red-skins a punishment they would long remember, and the fort and settlement had been saved from destruction by the well and secretly organized plan of the savages to gain scalps, plunder and prisoners.

"You have done splendidly, Captain DeLong, and shown your ability to handle a large force under most trying circumstances."

"I shall remember you most favorably in my reports; but, where is Dashing Charlie, may I ask?"

"He remained in the rear, sir, hoping to find some clew to that most remarkable man, the Mounted Tramp."

"You owe much to that man, I learn?"

"Well, sir, you remember that he saved you as the first of his good acts?"

"I cannot forget it indeed."

"And then, when made a prisoner by Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan, he saved them also by carrying them through the secret pass by which he led us."

"And then warned the settlement of their danger?"

"Yes, sir, and saved it from destruction, as he did the fort from perhaps a very close shave."

"True; and I heard from Dashing Charlie that he resented an insult offered by a settler, fought a duel on horseback with him and killed him, after he had been caught in some timber by some Indians, five of whom he killed, while, wounding the chief, he set him free in defiance of the settlers' wishes."

"It is so, General Wesley, and next he led the settlers to my rescue, and then disappeared, to suddenly send a note on an arrow into camp with a warning, and later to reappear, having crept into the corral unseen by any one."

"He went off in the same way, and, knowing of Dashing Charlie's coming with the relief, hastened to meet them, and so brought them up just in the very instant of time, saving us again."

"He is certainly a phenomenon."

"He is, indeed, sir, for he disappeared in the same mysterious way during the fight, and whether killed or not I cannot say."

"I sincerely hope that he has not been killed; but, what do you make of his being friendly with the Indians?"

"I cannot understand it, general."

"It is so, however?"
 "Beyond all doubt, sir."
 "And can you believe that he is really Black Horse Bill?"
 "All indications point that way, sir, though he denies the fact."
 "Well, of late Black Horse Bill has not been heard of on the trails; but if he is, I wish to ask if you will volunteer for a dangerous and important mission I have a desire to carry out?"
 "With pleasure, sir," was the prompt reply of the gallant captain.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DASHING CHARLIE'S RETURN.

DASHING CHARLIE and his men did not come in until two days after the return of the troops. The chief of scouts at once went and reported his arrival to the general, who welcomed him warmly and said:

"Emmett, you have distinguished yourself by your conduct in this affair, and I congratulate you upon having rendered such valuable service."

"I thank you, General Wesley," was the response of the scout, whose face flushed with just pride at the praise bestowed upon him by the commanding officer.

"Now tell me, Emmett, what did you find out about this strange man, the Mounted Tramp?"

"Next to nothing, sir."

"I held back on the trail hoping that he would leave the Indians and come back toward civilization, and I guarded with two men each of the three trails he would have to come by."

"But he did not show up, so I came in, as we were pretty well used up, horses as well as men."

"I don't wonder at that."

"But he may be dead, this man of mystery?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Why do you speak so confidently?"

"Well, sir, we did not find his body on the field, and that is one proof, and then I have an idea that he is a man who bears a charmed life."

"It would seem so."

"But is he Black Horse Bill, the outlaw chief?"

"I am sure I do not know, sir."

"You have a suspicion that he is?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"Do you mind giving me your reason for thinking as you do, Dashing Charlie?"

"No, sir, as the man has done enough to pardon a dozen outlaws."

"That is true."

"In the first place, General Wesley, the man is the image of Black Horse Bill, rides a black horse, or did until he lost the splendid animal he rode, and all who know the outlaw chief by sight, assert there is no mistake about his identity."

"But one of the settlers found it rather dangerous to accuse him, it seems?"

"Yes, sir, a settler by the name of Rufus Loudon forced a fight upon him and met death at his hands."

"I would like to stop these personal encounters upon the border, but suppose they must occur where life is held so cheap and the element we dwell among is such a desperate one."

"Yes, sir, lawlessness is hard to put down upon the border."

"Now what other motive have you for believing the Mounted Tramp to be Black Horse Bill, Emmett?"

"Diamond Dan was once held up, sir, by the outlaw chief, and robbed of two diamonds, a ring and a scarf-pin."

"Well?"

"The Mounted Tramp wears just such a ring and scarf-pin, and Diamond Dan asserts that he is the man without doubt."

"This seems like the most conclusive proof I have yet heard of."

"Now as to his being friendly with the Indians, because Captain DeLong can give no reason for it?"

"That is another proof, sir, for the outlaw Black Horse Bill is known to the red-skins and buys their good will with presents and plunder."

"That is a natural solution of that, I think."

"But have you heard anything of the outlaw chief of late?"

"No, sir, not for six weeks or more."

"The man says he is a Mounted Tramp, and yet his knowledge of this border is something wonderful."

"It is indeed, sir, and I cannot account for it, if he is not Black Horse Bill."

"Well, Emmett, I have a plan which will settle the truth, I hope, about the man, and if he is the outlaw chief, win him from his wicked life, for I can afford to be generous after all he has done to serve us."

"Yes, sir."

"If this plan of mine fails, I intend to have you go upon the trail of the outlaw and run him to earth, and with him in my power I can bring him to terms, for I do not wish either to shoot or hang the fellow, if he is the Mounted Tramp."

"Can I not volunteer to carry out your plan, sir?"

"Well, no, for it will require an army officer; but if my plan fails, then I shall call upon you to capture this Black Horse Bill alive for me."

"I am ready, sir, to obey, any command."

"I well know that, Emmett."

"But the officer I need for the service, and it is a dangerous one, has already volunteered for the work."

"Now tell me where you think is the most likely place to come in contact with the outlaw chief?"

"Do you mean, sir, as a wagon train, a traveler, or as a passenger in a coach on the overland?"

"As the latter, for there is a difference I believe!"

"Yes, sir, for the Black Horse Bravos always hold up a wagon-train in the very fastnesses of the mountains where they hold every advantage."

"They hold up a traveler either near the fort or the settlements, while the coaches are generally brought to upon the range."

"Very true, and it will be by a coach that I intend the officer to meet him."

"Then upon the incoming coach, sir, on the Crows' Roost Range, I should say would be the way to meet him."

"Thank you, Emmett, and remember, if my plan fails in this, then you are to go on a hunt for him, and take him alive."

"I await your orders, sir, with pleasure," was Dashing Charlie's response, as he saluted and went to his quarters.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RACKET RUBE.

THE days passed by at the fort, and nothing was heard of the Mounted Tramp, a man who had now become an object of interest to all at the military post, ladies as well as officers and soldiers.

He was regarded as a hero by all, and the mystery resting upon him made him that much more an interesting character.

Mrs. DeLong said in her pleasant, honest way, that if he were ten times Black Horse Bill, after what he had done for her husband she could forgive him his sins and take him by the hand.

Miss Viola Howland had only words of praise for him, while Gabrielle Garland, the beauty and heiress, who had all the officers in the garrison, and the ladies too, as admirers, asserted boldly that he was her beau ideal of a man, sinner though he might be, and that if he was Black Horse Bill he had never taken money without some palliating reason, that he had been driven to lawlessness by acts beyond his control.

Then the beautiful, sad eyes of Gabrielle Garland would become dim with tears, and she would quickly change the subject, and those who knew something of her past life would whisper that she had a skeleton in her heart of a love that had been broken through a man's wrong-doing.

A brother was known to have sinned beyond forgiveness and been driven from home by his stern father, who left his whole fortune to his daughter, who had given up the gay life of the city to come West and visit her school companion and cousin, Eloise DeLong, the lovely wife of the gallant Hero of the Corral, as he was called by his brother officers after his siege.

If there was one of the many handsome officers who had won more than friendship in the eyes of Gabrielle Garland since her coming to the fort, no one had observed who that one was, though a score of suitors were begging for her regard, several perhaps with an eye to marry the possessor of a cool million of money.

One evening, some weeks after the expedition after the Indians, the incoming coach from the East, was held up on the trail and the passengers robbed.

Of course it was done by Black Horse Bill, and General Wesley at once sent for Racket Rube the driver of the coach to come to his quarters.

Racket Rube was well-known along the frontier as a splendid driver, a brave man, genial companion to travel the Overland with, and one whose failing had gained for him his name, for every Christmas he went upon a spree which lasted him just thirty days.

At the end of his "racket" he reported for duty again and took his coach, for the company would not let him go under any circumstances, for he was a man to be relied upon, and always gave notice when he was going to have an orgie and no power had yet been found to keep him sober at the time indicated.

A man with a pleasant smile, frank manner, and with the form of a giant, he was both liked and dreaded.

"Yer sent fer me, general?" he said, doffing his sombrero and walking into the quarters of General Wesley, passing the sentinel with a pleasant punch in the ribs and the remark:

"How are you, brass-buttons?"

"Yes, Racket Rube, I wished to ask you about your last run."

"It was an unlucky one, sir."

"So I have heard."

"Tell me of 't."

"Waal, general, we was held up by Black Horse Bill this side of the Mountain Spring on Crows' Roost, and the insiders got done out of all their spare change."

"You saw Black Horse Bill?"

"Yes, sir, for he had me covered."

"Describe him."

"As handsome a devil as I ever seen in ther shape of man, sir; put up perfect, and with long brown hair and beard, while he has a look in his eye that it don't do to fool with."

"You would know him if you saw him again?"

"Yes, sir, in Hades," was the frank rejoinder.

"You go out again day after to-morrow, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was the chief surrounded by his band?"

"I only saw Black Horse Bill, sir, but t'others was there I know'd, so I obeys orders when I'm covered."

"You were wise, and had no other alternative."

"Now, Racket Rube, I wish you to do something for me."

"Name it, general, and it's done."

"I wish you to mention in the fort, where it will reach the ears of the hangers-on, that you are to bring an officer back, run after next, with Government money."

"That will fetch the Black Horse Bravos upon me, sir, sure."

"That is just what I wish."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the same story, as though in confidence, along the trail at the stage stations."

"I'll do it, sir."

"The officer will go out with you on this run, but return trip after next."

"I understand, sir, and I'll lay the trap."

And Racket Rube smiled in a way that showed he understood just what was wanted of him.

"Orderly, ask Captain DeLong to come to my quarters," said the general when Racket Rube had departed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE GENERAL'S PLOT.

CAPTAIN DeLong went at once to the quarters of General Wesley, upon receiving the word to do so from the orderly.

He had just finished dinner, and in dressing-gown and slippers was enjoying a fragrant cigar upon the piazza of his quarters, while he listened to Gabrielle Garland singing within the parlors, and surrounded by half a dozen young officers.

"How long will you be gone, Abner?" asked Mrs. DeLong, coming out of the parlor as her husband came from his room prepared to go.

"I cannot tell, Eloise, for I do not know what I am wanted for," was the reply, and he walked hastily to headquarters.

General Wesley was pacing the room and talking with his handsome *aide de camp*, Calvin Wainwright, when Captain DeLong entered.

"Ah, DeLong, be seated, for I have sent for you regarding the affair we were talking about."

Lieutenant Wainwright arose to go, for he was anxious to drop in and see Gabrielle Garland, yet had not cared to leave the general, who had appeared to desire to talk to him.

"Don't go, Wainwright, for I should like to have you in the secret also," said the general.

Thus urged the lieutenant resumed his seat, and Captain DeLong remarked:

"You refer to the affair of the Mounted Tramp, general?"

"Yes."

"I am at your service, sir."

"You have heard of Racket Rube's coach having been held up on its last run in?"

"Yes, sir."

"It was near Mountain Spring, upon Crows' Roost Range."

"So I heard, sir."

"And Black Horse Bill held it up."

"With his band?"

"No, or at least Racket Rube saw only the outlaw chief."

"And described him?"

"Yes."

"Did the description tally, sir?"

"Perfectly with the Mounted Tramp."

"Well, general, I am ready to obey your bidding."

"I know that, DeLong, and yet I hesitate to send you upon a mission that may cost you your life, for it will be a most perilous undertaking on your part."

"I am a soldier, sir, and my life belongs to my country, not myself."

"Well said."

"But bear my plan."

"Yes, general."

"I told Racket Rube that an officer would go out with him on this run, and return trip after next."

"That he must give out, where it could be picked up and circulated, that the officer was going to bring back a strong-box with Govern-

ment money in it, which was to be used for a certain purpose on the frontier."

"Yes, sir."

"This report would doubtless reach the ears of Black Horse Bill, through his spies, and so he would be ready to hold up the coach on that run."

"I understand, sir."

"The question is, however, whether he would hold it up in his usual merciless manner, by firing a volley into it, or by halting it as on the last trip without bloodshed."

"I must take my chances there, sir."

"And that is just what I dread to have you do, for this outlaw chief is no respecter of persons, you know."

"I am aware, sir, that his usual way of halting a coach is to kill the leaders and then fire a volley among the passengers."

"Yes, and in nearly every instance it has been fatal to one or more, for he killed once a woman, another time an old white-haired man, and at different times several soldiers."

"Not to speak of others, sir."

"Yes, he has certainly proven himself a merciless wretch."

"But for all that I wish you to take the chances and see this man."

"I will do it, sir, if he does not hold us up with a volley and I be the unlucky one," said the captain with a smile.

"I hope and pray you will not be."

"And if not, sir?"

"Then you are to ask for an interview with him apart from the others."

"Yes, sir."

"You are to tell him that the story of the treasure was a false one, arranged only to have a meeting with him, and that you are authorized by me to offer him a pardon for his crimes."

"If he is the man we suppose him to be, sir?"

"Yes, of course—the Mounted Tramp."

"I will obey your orders, sir."

"This freedom is to be offered him, however, only upon certain conditions."

"Yes, general."

"Those conditions are that he shall at once disband his outlaws and leave this border forever, pledging himself not to again lead a lawless life."

"You are to show him the pardon, and learn just what he will do."

"Yes, general, and if he accepts?"

"Let him at once disband his men, and then give him the pardon."

"If he should refuse, sir?"

"Well, then all I can say is to tell him that I have given him the chance of a different life, for the services he has rendered me and others, and as he refuses to accept his pardon, then I shall at once begin to wage a war upon him that shall be merciless," and the face and words of the general showed that he was in earnest.

CHAPTER XL.

THE VOLUNTEER.

LIEUTENANT WAINWRIGHT had listened in silence to all that had been said by General Wesley and Captain DeLong.

He was thus made acquainted with the exact situation and what was expected of Captain DeLong.

"General, will you permit me to make a suggestion, sir?" he said, in his quiet way.

"Certainly, Wainwright, with pleasure."

"I was thinking, sir, if duty called Captain DeLong away, at the head of his command, he could not but go; but in this case he goes upon a work that is perilous, and alone he has to face the danger."

"He is a married man, only two years a husband and should he fall he would leave a broken-hearted wife."

"Now, I am only a lieutenant and *aide-de-camp*, who, not having a command could be readily sent on this duty, while you remember I also know this man Black Horse Bill as well as Captain DeLong does."

"To make my claim for the duty greater, let me suggest that I am not married, my parents are dead, I have neither sister or brother, and my loss would be felt only by my friends, if it happened that I was killed."

"Under these circumstances I claim the right to go."

"By no means, my dear Wainwright, though I appreciate your kind intention," said Captain DeLong warmly.

"No, no, the duty is mine."

"On the contrary, DeLong, I have been won over by the arguments which Wainwright presents, and which I never took into consideration."

"But, general I—"

"No, I should have remembered that you were married, and though I did have the thought of sending you, Wainwright, I will frankly tell you that I was fearful of your impetuous nature getting you into trouble where DeLong's cool head would serve him best."

"But I am as cool as a veteran, general, in a place where I have need to be, sir."

"Yes, General Wesley, I must be the one to go, for I claim it as my right."

"But I cannot yield the honor, Wainwright," said the captain with a smile.

"Yes you can, DeLong, and must, for Wainwright is my *aide* and the duty is really his, not yours."

"Yes, the lieutenant is to go."

Captain DeLong saw that the young officer had won, that the general was determined, and he bowed in acquiescence while he said:

"I am sorry, sir, that you have changed your mind, but you know best."

"I do, now that Wainwright has shown me my duty in this matter."

"Why, I could never look your sweet wife in the face if I sent you off on a duty that got you killed when your troop was not at your back to support you, and Miss Gabrielle would never forgive me either, for she regards you as affectionately as though you were her brother."

"Now, Lieutenant Wainwright, we will go over this matter again, so that you will understand just what your duties are."

"I think I understand, sir, and yet I would suggest, as you said, that Dashing Charlie was to hunt down the outlaw, in case of his refusal to accept your very generous terms, that you permit me to attempt his capture."

"Have you any idea how it can be done?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is it, please?"

"We do not often hear of Black Horse Bill being accompanied by his men, or rather it is oftener that he is seen without his band than with them."

"Yes, but if not seen they are there."

"I hardly think so, general, for when with him they invariably show themselves, and that is why I believe he is oftener alone, though he would have those whom he holds up think he is backed by his band."

"There may be something in this, Lieutenant, as you say."

"I think so, also, sir," said Captain DeLong.

"Well, Wainwright, what is your plan should he be alone?"

"I would convince myself that he was alone, sir, before I acted."

"Then, when sure of it, if he refused your pardon, and did so decidedly, I would be ready to cover him with my revolver, and make him a prisoner."

The general shook his head dubiously, while Captain DeLong remarked:

"That was just what I had decided to do, if I saw the slightest chance of success in the attempt."

"His refusal would end any armistice there might be between us, general, and so I might thus capture him, as I have said."

"Well, Wainwright, I leave that to you to determine when the time comes for action."

"In spite of your reckless nature I must admit that you have a very cool head in emergencies and do not act rashly."

"We will leave the matter in your hands then, and you are to go out on Racket Rube's coach."

It being thus decided, Calvin Wainwright returned with Captain DeLong to his quarters and joined the pleasant party there.

He was the last to take his leave, and when he did so he offered his hand to both Mrs. DeLong and Gabrielle, while the captain saw the look in his face that indicated the belief that he would never see them again, for he was to leave on the stage early the next morning.

"Poor fellow, he goes upon what I deem a desperate mission."

And in confidence the captain explained to his wife and Gabrielle what it was, and how the lieutenant had volunteered in his stead.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE START.

THE fact that the Mounted Tramp had not put in an appearance at the fort, had not been seen after the battle at the corral with the Indians, whose friend he had appeared, though also serving the pale faces, and that Black Horse Bill had appeared upon the Overland Trail at his old deeds of wickedness once more, seemed conclusive proof to many that the outlaw and the stranger were one and same person.

After the holding up of Racket Rube's coach, there was once more a terror of the trail felt by those who had to travel back and forth.

They knew from hearsay, if not from experience, that Black Horse Bill was a very merciless foe, and all were his enemies who did not calmly submit to being robbed by him and his band.

When the coach rolled up to the starting-point next morning there was a large crowd to see it start.

Racket Rube was looked upon as a hero to dare drive it, though the outlaws very seldom ever made war upon Overland drivers, unless they resisted or attempted to save their passengers from robbery by flight, and, to do this, was for the man on the box to surely sign his death-warrant.

There was but one passenger to go in the coach, and he came out of his quarters carrying a small hand-sachel.

He had had an early breakfast, and was smoking a cigar as he walked toward the coach, Racket Rube was on his box, the cynosure of

all eyes, until the lieutenant came, and then every eye was upon him, for the rumor had gone about that Lieutenant Calvin Wainwright was to go to the eastward to meet a treasure-box *en route* for the west by coach, and bring it back to the fort.

So it was that the dashing young officer was looked upon as a greater hero than the driver, for he carried his life in his hands all knew.

"I'll ride on the box with you, Racket Rube."

"Have a cigar," and he tossed the driver a fragrant weed which was skillfully caught.

Racket Rube knew a good cigar when he saw it, so he tossed the one he was smoking away, and lighted the fresh one with a match, remarking:

"Thank you, lieutenant."

"I'll light it with fire and not from the sutler's weed, which would destroy its flavor."

"Glad to have you on the box, sir."

The lieutenant tossed his cloak and sachel into the empty coach and leaped lightly up to the box, while the crowd gave him a send-off with a cheer.

The way led by the quarters of the married officers, and as the coach rolled by, Lieutenant Wainwright saw upon their piazza Mrs. DeLong and Gabrielle Garland pacing to and fro.

It was a surprise and pleasure to him, for it was not often that they were such early risers.

They waved their hands to him and Mrs. DeLong called out:

"Our best wishes go with you, Lieutenant Wainwright."

He bent low in acknowledgment as he raised his hat, and a moment after at the stockade gate, he saw Captain DeLong, who was officer of the day.

"You have my heartfelt wishes for your success, Wainwright."

"Did you see Eloise and Gabrielle, for they said they would get up to see you off?"

"Yes, I saw them; but do they know—"

"Oh, yes, for after your noble act, could I refrain from telling them, old man?"

The lieutenant waved his hand and Racket Rube drove on, sending his horses along at a rattling pace.

"Lieutenant, ther general told me that this was ter be a fake trip, as far as ther strong-box was concerned," said Racket Rube, after they had gotten well upon their way.

"Yes, General Wesley informed me that you were in the secret, Racket Rube," was the answer.

"Yes, sir, and we had better agree upon some plan, so we can understand each other and make no mistake."

"That is just it, Rube, and I wish to ask your advice, as well as to question you a little."

"Fire away, sir, and if I knows anything you wants ter know, I'll give it up."

"Did you, in the first place, see any one else than Black Horse Bill in the last attack on your coach?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"How many times has he held up your coach, Rube?"

"Just twelve times, sir, and the next will be thirteen."

"An unlucky number," said the lieutenant, grimly.

"Yes, sir, so I has found it."

"How many times has he been alone?"

"I don't think he has ever been alone, sir."

"Yet you have not seen his men any time?"

"No, sir, but they have been there, I feels sart'in."

"How often have you seen the band with him?"

"Jist six times, sir."

"Well, Racket Rube, I have an idea that when you see him alone he is playing a bluff game, and that his men are not with him."

"It may be, sir."

"Now I intend to find out, and more, I shall see if we cannot get the outlaw chief to go to the fort with us as an inside passenger."

"Waal, lieutenant, I am with you, whatever you say do; but we'll talk it all over and see just what is best to be done, for we'll be catching a panther in a trap, I'm thinking, when we get our grip on this same Black Horse Bill."

"Such is my opinion, too, Racket Rube," answered the lieutenant, in an absent-minded way.

CHAPTER XLII.

ON THE OVERLAND.

LIEUTENANT WAINWRIGHT was as full of nerve as a cocoanut is of meat, and was a man to be depended upon in a close place as had been proven on more than a dozen different happenings.

He had graduated well up in his class at West Point, had been promoted for gallantry on his first year of service, and assigned to General Wesley as *aide* for another case of "distinguished services on the field."

He was a rough and skillful rider, a good plainsman for his experience, a dead-shot, and popular with his brother officers and men.

The duty he was going on was just to his liking, but the more danger there was to face the more he relished it.

Anxious to take the outlaw chief into the fort peaceably if he could, he had made up his mind to carry him in by force if fair means would not accomplish it.

He had brought with him his crack revolvers and was prepared for whatever might turn up.

The coach reached the end of Racket Rube's run without adventure, or picking up a passenger.

From there the officer went on with another driver, but he had planned with Racket Rube to come back on the next trip but one and go to the fort with him.

He then continued on to the end of the second run from there, a small frontier village.

Here he stopped at the hotel, and while waiting for the next coach west again, went out into the timber near to try his hand in pistol practice.

What he accomplished in the way of dead shot shooting seemed perfectly satisfactory to him, and returning to the hotel he amused himself as best he could in looking at the odd characters which the frontier alone can produce.

He was not long in discovering that the rumor that he was there to meet a valuable package of some kind had gone along the Overland.

When the coach came in he at once called the driver to his room and said:

"What I say to you, Benning, I do not wish reported."

"No indeed, lieutenant."

"Have you had any suspicious characters ride with you on your westward run?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"Have you heard any rumors of any kind?"

"Only, sir, that you were here to receive a valuable package from me; but I have nothing, sir, going further west."

"All right, but let it be thought that you have got such a package for me, for you have a leather case with you, I see?"

"Yes, sir, a bundle of registered mail for the postmaster at the mining-camp."

"Then let it be thought that you gave it to me."

"That will cause you to be held up sure, sir, for the Black Horse Bravos will be on the watch for you."

"That is just what I am after, Benning."

"Oh, that is it, is it, sir?"

"Yes."

"Well, lieutenant, you are full of grit, I know, but if Black Horse Bill suspects that you carry treasure, your life will not be worth a cent, for he is no respecter of persons, you know, sir."

"Yes, I know; but it is just what I wish to have him suspect."

"I hope it will come out all right for you, sir."

"Thank you, Benning, I trust so myself."

"I've heard, sir, that Black Horse Bill had done the general a service, sir, and the settlements too, but I couldn't believe it."

"If the man who rendered these services is Black Horse Bill, Benning, he certainly did do that which will go a long way toward gaining mercy for him, should he be taken."

"I cannot believe it, sir, of the man, for I know him."

"You have had considerable experience with him, I believe?"

"I have seen him kill a man riding by my side, sir, who was as innocent as a woman of intending to resist him, and he put a bullet into me once because my team were restive and I could not hold them quiet enough for him."

"It was not his fault that he did not kill me, for I did not leave my bed for four months."

"On another time, lieutenant, he ordered his band to fire upon my coach, when I told him I had eight men inside, and three of them were killed, when they had no idea of resisting him."

"Oh, but he's a bad one, lieutenant, and I dislike greatly to see you go on the run under suspicion of carrying a treasure, for he'll either hold Darby's coach up or Racket Rube's, and he'll come ready to kill, for gold is what he is after and will have."

"He may get lead instead, Benning."

"But, I thank you for your kindness, and will now go down, for the coach leaves soon."

With his satchel in hand, and carried in a way that showed it was weighty, the lieutenant left his room and proceeded to the hotel office.

He paid his bill, and, going out to the coach, mounted the box with the driver, Hen Slater.

The run made by Slater was of forty miles, and then he got on the coach-box with the next driver, Darby, who had a run of fifty miles and five teams to make it with.

He reached the starting-point of Racket Rube's run at sunrise, and from there to the fort was sixty miles or more and a rough ride of it, as well as a dangerous one.

Racket Rube greeted the young lieutenant with a look as though he was sorry he had returned, and shook his head in an ominous sort of way, but mounted the box and started his team on the ride to the fort.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE HALT.

For some distance had the coach rolled along before Racket Rube broke the silence, which the

young officer, busy with his own thoughts, had not appeared to notice.

"It's a strange thing, lieutenant," at last said Rube, "that, going and coming, you've been the only passenger I've had inside or out."

"It does not often occur then, Rube?"

"Waal, it don't, sir."

"Is the cause on account of the last hold-up, do you think?"

"I knows it is, sir, for the people is scared."

"Indeed?"

"Yas, sir; for I had out with me last run five pilgrims, and in there was seven."

"When I was not along?"

"Yas, sir, they seemed to be scared o' you."

"Afraid of me?" asked the officer with surprise.

"Waal, I means they is afeard of being along on the trip with you."

"And why?"

"They is afeard of trouble, for when you is expected ter have money the folks is scared to be with yer when yer is held up, as all says you is one of ther kind ter fight."

The lieutenant laughed and asked:

"What was the news at the fort when you were there on your last run, Rube?"

"The general sent for me, sir, and asked how you got along and all that, and said I must back you up in what you did."

"You told him you would do so, I suppose?"

"I told him I was on hand when you give ther word for a run or a row."

"Well, I hope that it will be neither, Racket Rube."

"I hopes so, sir, but I kinder has fears we is going ter hev trouble."

"It may be."

"I told the young lady, sir, I'd try and keep you out of trouble," ventured Racket Rube.

"Told what young lady, Racket Rube?" and the face of the officer flushed crimson.

"Miss Garland, sir."

"You saw her then?"

"Yes, sir, she met me on the parade-ground and asked me how we got through, and when I told her all right she said that I mustn't let you be rash."

"She's very kind indeed."

"She's as sweet as any leddy I ever seen, sir, for she come east on my coach, and I was driving Darby and Benning's run too on that trip, as the latter was wounded and the former was gone home for a week or so."

"I tell you, sir, she treated me just as kind as if I had been one of her friends."

"Miss Garland is a very lovely character, Rube."

"She is that, sir, and so is Mrs. DeLong, for they both is the kind of leddies I likes ter see."

"The captain asked after you too, sir."

"Captain DeLong?"

"Yes, sir."

"He said as how he wished he was along with you, and to tell you to go awful slow in what you had decided upon."

"Did you see Dashing Charlie?"

"He left the fort, sir, jist before I did on my run out."

"Where did he go?"

"I didn't ask him, sir, and them I did ask didn't know."

"Off on a scout somewhere, I guess."

"More than likely, sir."

"There was no news of the Mounted Tramp?"

"No, sir, not a word, but it's my idee that we'll hear of him."

"On this run?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Rube, in case we are held up I will at once call to the chief that I wish to have a talk with him, and upon his response I will know just what to do."

"If he is alone, we will find it out, as also we will if his band is with him."

"And if he don't hold up ther coach on this run, sir?"

"I shall stop at the last relay before reaching the fort, or rather go back to it after we pass the danger point, to join you on your next ride out, for I am determined to meet this Black Horse Bill, Racket Rube, and know just what he is, and intends doing."

"Waal, sir, if we meets him it will be at Crow's Roost, somewhere near the Mountain Spring."

"We will reach there after noon some time?"

"Yes, sir, along about two o'clock."

And so they drove on in silence once more for a long while, the lieutenant lost in his own reveries, which were of a pleasant nature, for he was glad to hear that Gabrielle Garland had asked about him.

The Mountain Spring was reached, and a halt was made there of a quarter of an hour, for this was a rule of the driver's.

The spring was icy cold, and it was located in the mountain-top on the range known as the Crow's Roost, a wild and picturesque part of the drive.

There Racket Rube was wont to always halt for his noonday lunch, and to take his daily allowance of liquor, as he said there was no other water he cared to mix with his whisky other

than that which flowed from the Mountain Spring.

The halt, too, gave the horses a breathing-spell, and a cool draught of water after their climb up the mountain.

Then came the ride of miles along the ridge known as Crow's Roost, and afterward the descent to the valley and the undulating trail from there to the fort, twenty miles away.

Mounting the box once more, Racket Rube gathered up his reins, the lieutenant seated by his side as before, and the team set off at a brisk trot, to suddenly be reined to a halt as loud rung the command from among the rocks:

"Halt that coach, Racket Rube, or say your last prayer on earth!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

BLACK HORSE BILL.

PACING up and down, in an open space between a group of huge boulders, half an hour before the coach of Racket Rube came into view at Mountain Spring, was a man of striking mien.

His horse, a splendid black steed, richly caparisoned with a silver-studded Mexican saddle and bridle, stood near, grazing the juicy grass which grew luxuriantly upon half a dozen mounds whose shape could never be mistaken for other than they were—graves.

They were seven in number, and they marked the last resting-place of those who had fallen victims to the greed of gold of the lawless man who had won the name of Black Horse Bill.

It was he who now paced to and fro among the rocks, not a glance bestowing upon the graves of his victims.

The man was dressed in black pants stuck in the tops of his boots, and which had upon the heels spurs of gold and of rare workmanship, representing an eagle's head and wings.

His form was slender, yet athletic, and he wore a hunting-shirt of soft silk, under the collar of which was a scarf tied in a sailor knot, and in which sparkled a diamond of large size and beauty.

Upon his left little finger was another diamond, the design being a pair of eagle's claws clasping the stone, which was the match of the one in his scarf.

A sombrero sheltered his head, and was encircled by a cord representing a coiled lasso.

His hair was brown and worn long, and a silken beard of the same hue fell to his waist, giving him a dignified, almost majestic look, though he was yet a very young man.

His waist was slender, and encircled by an embroidered belt, in which were a pair of splendidly mounted revolvers and a bowie with richly carved handle.

The man was one to attract attention anywhere, and if he was not the Mounted Tramp, then he was certainly his counterpart.

No other person was visible near him, and as he paced to and fro with steady tramp, his face was as calm as though no shadows had ever disturbed the sunshine of his life.

He would pause in his walk now and then and glance down the trail toward the Mountain Spring, and then take from a pocket in his silk shirt a massive gold watch and glance at the time.

But he did not show the slightest impatience, and returned his watch to his pocket with no comment.

Near his horse lay a pair of saddle-bags, a rifle, cloak, a serape, india-rubber blanket, haversack and saddle-roll, as though taken off to lessen the weight of his horse while waiting and feeding.

The bit had also been removed from the animal's mouth, but he seemed to have no desire to stray away from his rider.

At last the man halted suddenly, placed his hand to his ear, and listened.

"The coach is coming," he said, aloud.

"Now it is a question of whether I get lead or gold."

He stepped to where his horse was, fastened the bit in his mouth, threw the saddle-bags on, strapped the roll to the cantle and hung his hammock on one side and tied on the serape and rubber blanket.

The cloak was thrown across the saddle and the rifle slung upon the saddle-horn, which was massive and studded with silver.

Mounting, the man presented with his large, magnificent horse a splendid picture, one to behold and never forget.

The coach was rolling along the ridge trail and the horses were at a brisk trot, the horseman watching the approach through the foliage of a tree growing between two rocks which completely concealed him from the view of those on the stage-box until the vehicle should get abreast of his position.

It was only when the heads of the readers came into view around the boulder that he uttered the ominous command to Racket Rube to draw rein or accept his doom of death.

With a quick glance at the lieutenant, Racket Rube brought his horses to a sudden standstill.

His foot was upon the brake and his hands held the reins well in his grip, ready for just such a startling command as he had received.

Hardly had the coach come to a standstill

when the road-agent chief rode out from behind the rocks, a revolver in his right hand and ready for use.

"Waal, Black Horse Bill, what does yer want this time, yer mountain vulture?" said Racket Rube, in his usual insulting way of speaking to the outlaws, for nothing had ever frightened him into a wholesome respect for them.

The outlaw smiled as he rode close up to the coach, his revolver in his right hand and ready for instant use if needed.

As he came forward the lieutenant gazed fixedly at him, taking in his face, form, dress, equipments and horse, and then came the words as though thinking aloud:

"Dashing Charlie was right, for the Mounted Tramp and Black Horse Bill are one and the same."

CHAPTER XLV.

A GAME OF BLUFF.

"WELL, Black Horse Bill, how are you?" said Lieutenant Wainwright in an off-hand manner as the outlaw chief halted near the coach.

"Well, thank you, Lieutenant Wainwright," was the pleasant response.

"I see that you remember me?"

"I know you as Lieutenant Wainwright, aide-de-camp to General Wesley, sir."

"And don't you think you are playing a very bold and desperate game to halt the United States mail upon the highway, and especially when it is under the protection of an army officer?"

"My dear sir, the United States owes me a living, and if I cannot get it in one way I must in another, while, as for being stayed by your presence from robbing the mails, I will say that I am here to hold this coach up wholly on your account."

"Indeed, and why?"

"Because I happen to be aware that you are the bearer of a large sum of Government money."

"And have you looked into the coach to see that I have men there to protect it?"

Both Racket Rube and the officer saw the start the outlaw gave at this, and he glanced quickly toward the coach, while he said:

"But I have you covered, sir, so if you value life you will obey orders."

Lieutenant Wainwright did not flinch at the sudden covering of himself by the outlaw's revolver, but said:

"My dear sir, if you have me under the muzzle of your revolver you forget that my soldiers have you at an advantage."

"And my men cover the coach and yourselves—see, I lower my weapon, as a signal from me, a word, would riddle the coach and drop you and Racket Rube from the box."

"Remember, I am merciless when on a gold trail."

Racket Rube began to grow uneasy, for the lieutenant was pressing the outlaw chief pretty hard, he thought.

In response to the words of the outlaw, Lieutenant Wainwright laughed.

"You seem amused," sneered the chief.

"I am."

"At what, pray?"

"Your game of bluff."

"I fail to comprehend you."

"You have not a man near you to call upon."

"Do not fool yourself with that idea, for whatever else has been said of Black Horse Bill, he has never yet been called a fool."

"Still I repeat you are trying a game of bluff, halting a coach full of soldiers by yourself, and, but for my knowledge that you have not a man near to aid you, I believe you would have forced me to give up my money."

The outlaw chief moved uneasily in his saddle, while he glanced at the coach, as though to pierce the secret of the leather curtains.

Racket Rube began to get interested intensely, for he saw that the lieutenant could play a game of bluff most skillfully.

"Shall I convince you that my men are within call of my voice, within sight of my signal?"

"Yes."

"I will do so by having them drop Racket Rube dead from that box."

"No, Rube has done nothing to incur your hatred, and his death might interfere with your gold-hunting, as there would be no one else dare drive the trail."

"What shall I do to convince you, then, that my men are ready and willing to obey my command?"

The face of the young officer did not change color, and in the coolest manner possible he held up his hat and said:

"Let them send a bullet through this."

"Bah! do you think that I would let them waste powder and lead on that?"

"Then let them send a bullet through my heart."

"No, for I believe you have buried that treasure on the trail, and I would never find it until I forced you to lead me to it."

"See here, Black Horse Bill, you are a perfect fraud, for you have not a single man near you, and I defy you to prove it."

The outlaw was growing uneasy, that was certain.

He had met his match in his game of bluff, and Racket Rube began to feel more at ease.

He had never known any one get the best of the Black Horse Bravo before, and the lieutenant certainly now seemed to hold the winning hand.

"What, do you defy me, because you wear the uniform of an officer?"

"No, I defy you as man to man, as one who is not to be bullied and robbed by you, as one who does not fear you in the slightest degree, and who came here prepared to force you to terms, for I have the power to do so, yet first will give you a chance for life by making a proposition to you."

"What have you to say?" asked Black Horse Bill, and Racket Rube, who was watching him closely, saw that the chief was not showing the nerve that he had exhibited upon every other occasion when he had met him, and which he had started in with.

"I have this to say, sir, that if you are no fool, to trust yourself alone to rob the United States Mail coach, neither am I a fool to place myself in the power of a merciless desperado, and where you could give me no proof that you have a single man near to aid you, I advise you not to cause me to give you proof that I have you in my power."

"Now, Sir Outlaw, are you ready to listen to the terms I have to offer?"

"I will hear what you have to say, lieutenant."

"You are wise, and will show greater wisdom to heed what I have to tell you, for I am armed with full authority, let me say."

"The lieutenant has made him weaken, or I serenely lies," muttered Racket Rube, hardly able to restrain his delight from finding vent in a whoop.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE REFUSAL.

THAT the lieutenant was playing a very daring game, Racket Rube realized, and his heart was in his throat, so to speak, with a dread of the result.

There was no doubt in the driver's mind but that the outlaw chief was alone.

If not he had certainly refrained from showing his strength in a very remarkable way, and his manner clearly indicated annoyance at his position.

The lieutenant on the contrary was as serene as a May morn, showing no sign of anxiety, and in fact an indifference to the danger of his situation that won the admiration of the driver to a very great extent.

"Well, Black Horse Bill, I have just these terms to offer."

"You have been guilty of many crimes, murders in cold blood and robberies."

"Granted."

"You have been outlawed and there is a price upon your head."

"Dead or alive."

"Yes, and yet you have of late done the Government a great service in that you saved General Wesley and others from capture or death at the hands of the red-skins, you saved the fort from a surprise, gave the settlements warning of the attack of the Indians, and on the pursuit and during the battles that followed, you rendered such valuable services to the troops, that the general has been pleased to grant you a pardon."

"A pardon for what?"

"For all your crimes committed as the leader of the band known as the Black Horse Bravos."

"He is very kind."

Whether that was said with a sneer or in earnest neither the officer nor the driver knew.

"But there are conditions attending this pardon."

"Name them, please."

"You are to at once disband your men."

"You say that I have none."

"No; I say that you have none with you here."

"You will see in good time."

"Come, don't begin your bluff game again, for I know you are alone, one against us, and if a fight is forced, you may kill one of us, but not both, and you would surely lose your own life, for you are in danger."

"What are the terms you refer to, Lieutenant Wainwright?"

"That you disband your men at once, and pledge your word to leave the frontier."

"But, where would I go?"

"Where you please, for you certainly have enough ill gotten gains laid by to support you."

"Yes, I am not a pauper or beggar."

"No; you demand your living at the revolver's muzzle."

"When am I to get this pardon?"

"I have it with me now."

"Ah! you expected to find me, then?"

"Yes."

"Why so, sir?"

"We laid a trap to catch you."

Again the uneasy look crossed the man's face,

and he cast a quick, furtive glance at the coach.

But he failed to see any revolver-muzzles or faces there, and that very fact caused him to feel that there were those who had him under cover whom he did not see.

"What was your trap?"

"I'll tell you."

"General Wesley, after your valuable services, wished to be merciful to you, and so decided to extend this pardon which I have."

"Here it is, properly signed, sealed, and ready to be delivered when you accept the terms."

And the lieutenant took the pardon from his pocket and held it up to view.

"Read it, please."

The officer did so.

It was dated at the military headquarters of the district, one week before, and read as follows:

"To whom it may concern:—"

"I hereby make known that I have this day extended pardon to ———, known on this frontier as Black Horse Bill, the chief of a band of outlaws, in consideration, and as a reward for his valuable services to the Government, the military forces occupying Fort Advance, and the three contiguous settlements, in preventing a surprise by the Indians which would have resulted most disastrously to all whites on this border."

"From this date therefore be it known that the said ———, *alias* Black Horse Bill, is hereby constituted once more by this pardon an honorable citizen of the United States."

The name and rank of the general followed, with the statement in postscript, then a like paper was forwarded for approval to the superior officers of the army, and thence to the Secretary of War and the President, and quoting a special order allowing the commander of a military district to give such pardon where he deemed it proper to do so.

"That appears to be all right, lieutenant, and it is very kind of the general to do this for me."

"But the truth is, with a pardon for crimes done on the border, it is not reaching enough, as I am a fugitive from justice for deeds done elsewhere."

"You do not mean to say that you will refuse this pardon of General Wesley?"

"I certainly do mean it," was the determined response of Black Horse Bill, and he met the gaze of the officer unflinchingly, while Racket Rube said, very decidedly:

"You is ther durndest fool on record, Black Horse Bill."

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE RESULT.

"WHETHER I am a fool or not, Racket Rube, I am sincere in my refusal of that pardon," said the outlaw curtly, in response to the uncomplimentary remark of Racket Rube.

"You refuse this pardon then, I am to understand?" asked Wainwright.

"I do."

"You cannot surely forget that by so doing you continue an outlaw."

"I forget nothing."

"And will be hunted to your end."

"Perhaps."

"That end is the gallows."

"I have lived under its shadow so long that it has lost its terrors for me now."

"I am really sorry at your decision, as others whom you served so well will be."

"Well, thank the general for me, please, lieutenant, and then tell him, as a proof that I will still continue as Black Horse Bill, the outlaw chief, that I robbed you of your treasure."

"What treasure?"

"The one you have."

"Where?"

"With you."

"I have no treasure."

"You certainly went eastward to get a lot of Government money."

"So it was said."

"Come, lieutenant, it does not become a United States officer to tell a falsehood, to protect his property, rather than fight for it."

Calvin Wainwright laughed, and replied:

"I agree with you, Black Horse Bill; an army officer should defend any treasure committed to his care, even to his life's sacrifice, rather than attempt to save it by lying."

"But, as I told you, I have not a dollar of United States money with me, only some hundred dollars of my own, my watch, chain, sleeve-buttons, and this seal ring, a penknife, my weapons and outfit for this trip."

"That is all."

"Do you mean to say that you failed to get the money you were sent after?" angrily demanded the outlaw.

"I was not sent after any."

"It is false."

"See here, I told you that we laid a trap to catch you in, and we caught you."

"I am not caught yet."

"Oh, yes you are, for you could not raise a hand or attempt to leave without discovering that you were a prisoner."

"Come, Black Horse Bill, let me tell you that, as the general could not find you readily, to give you this pardon, it was given out that I

should go to fetch back with me some Government money, returning on this coach.

"It was thought you would be notified by your spies, and so it has turned out; but though I have carried out my plot, I have no money with me belonging to the Government, nor did I go to fetch any.

"It has served its purpose, the rumor has, for it brought me face to face with you, and I offered you the pardon and it was refused.

"That, therefore, ends any more sentiment between us in your behalf, and now I tell you," and the voice of the lieutenant rung now threateningly, while taking a revolver from the top of the coach where it had been lying, he leveled it at the outlaw and continued his sentence with:

"Up with your hands, or you are a dead man!"

The face of the outlaw turned livid, and he glanced quickly toward the coach, when Racket Rube called out:

"Yer'll hear from them as is in ther hearse, Black Horse Bill, ef yer don't raise them hands o' yourn."

The hands were slowly raised above his head by the outlaw, and in one he still held the revolver he had drawn when riding up to the coach.

"Get his guns, Rube, and see that you do not leave any weapons he may hurt himself with."

Racket Rube sprang nimbly to the ground and in a moment had fully disarmed the outlaw chief, whose face was now of an ashen hue.

A moment more and he had slipped upon his wrists steel handcuffs, and ordering him to dismount, said:

"I guesses as ther old hearse is crowded, lieutenant, we better hev him ride on top with us."

"Yes, it would be best," and the prisoner was aided to the box, while his horse was stripped of his saddle and made fast alongside of one of the leaders.

"Now I guesses we kin light out," said Racket Rube.

"Yes, drive on now, Rube."

"We won't wait for ther rest of ther band, Black Horse Bill, being as they must all be asleep in ther rocks yonder, not having come to your aid."

"No more than our reserve force aid us, Rube," said the lieutenant with a motion toward the coach.

"Have you not men in the coach?" quickly asked the chief.

"Not a man."

Black Horse Bill uttered an oath both loud and deep, for up to that moment he had believed that the coach was full of soldiers.

"It was honors easy for both of us, Black Horse Bill," said Wainwright with a smile.

"Do you still offer me that pardon?" suddenly asked the chief.

"Oh, no, you refused it, and then we captured you, so you must answer now for your crimes."

The outlaw made no reply but bit his lips savagely.

His face showed how deeply he felt his capture, and he settled back in silence as Racket Rube took the reins and once more started on his way.

But suddenly the face of the outlaw changed color, lighting up as with a ray of hope, and seeing it Calvin Wainwright felt that the man might still prove to be dangerous through some act of treachery.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE OUTLAW'S TRAP.

THE expression upon the face of Black Horse Bill was noticed by Racket Rube also, and he could not understand it, but mused to himself:

"It means some trick, sure as shooting."

From his silence the outlaw suddenly became loquacious.

"That is a fine team you have, Racket Rube," he said.

"Oh, yes, I never drives a mean horse."

"It goes ag'in' me."

"And what do you think of my animal there, Lieutenant Wainwright?"

"He is a splendid horse, it's good points are an indication."

"He is indeed, for he's good for an all-day gallop."

"And looks fast."

"I can catch an antelope on him."

"Yes, Dashing Charlie was telling me something of his wonderful powers of endurance."

"What does he know about my horse?"

"You know that be joined you the night you saved General Wesley and his party, and saw what your horse could do."

"Oh, yes, I remember."

"But I thought you had lost him, when the Indians captured him."

"I got him back again."

"So I see."

"You are friendly with the Indians I believe?"

"Oh, yes, I have to be."

"Side with the red-skins against your own people, eh?"

"My own people hunt me down like a wolf, and when I am driven hard I can find a refuge

among the Indians, for I pay them well, so there is no friendship in it, but business."

"I see; but did you ever stop to consider that if your own people hunt you down like a wolf it is because you act like a wolf toward them?"

"I must live."

"By killing and robbing those who are willing to work for a living?"

"I am an outlaw, you know, my hand raised against every man, as every man's hand is raised against me."

"Did you not bring it upon yourself?"

"Perhaps."

"Were not the two paths before you for you to choose, honor on the one hand, vice on the other?"

"Yes, and circumstances made me a criminal."

"You have not even the plea of ignorance for your going wrong, as you are a man of education."

"Oh, yes, I received the best of educations."

"Then there is that more reason why you should never have gone wrong; you are that much better able to select between the good and the bad."

"And I made my selection, and will stand by it."

"You are a strange man, for you had the alternative awhile since of receiving a pardon."

"And I refused it."

"Yes."

"But I will take it now."

"Yes, as a drowning man will grasp at a straw; but it is too late."

"You do not think the general will give me that pardon now?"

"No, I know that he will not."

"If I give him my pledge to give up this life?"

"It is too late."

"Then I suppose I will be sent to prison for life?"

"Oh, no!"

"What then?"

"You will be hanged."

The outlaw smiled, but said:

"What proof have you that I have committed murder?"

"Your own words."

"I kin prove it, so kin others of us who handle ther reins," said Racket Rube.

"Well, I suppose I must hang, and as I rather like your coming out here at the risk of your life to befriend me, Lieutenant Wainwright, I will leave you my horse, saddle, bridle, and in fact my outfit."

"You are very kind; but I am willing to purchase them of you."

"What good would money do a man who is to be hanged?"

"Have you no one you would care to leave it to?"

"No one."

"No mother, or sister, or wife?"

The outlaw's face blanched at the words, and for a moment he said nothing.

Then he replied, and his voice was low and plaintive:

"No, my mother is dead, I have no wife, and the one sister I had is above want."

"Then I will accept your horse and equipments, if you will allow me to devote their value to some good purpose?"

"What, for instance?"

"Give it to some poor person you have robbed of their all."

"Do as you please about that, sir, but I leave you the outfit when I die."

"You can afford ter," muttered the driver, and the outlaw laughed and replied:

"Yes, for dead men have few wants."

"Only a grave and a funeral sermon."

"You'll git ther fu'st, but I doubt if yer'll git ther latter."

Again the outlaw laughed at Racket Rube's way of putting it and said:

"Well, I like pluck, and I think Lieutenant Wainwright showed it in a wonderful degree, while he also felt that he was doing me a kindness in coming out here to bring me that pardon."

"For these reasons I make him my heir; but go slow here, Racket Rube, as this is a long and very bad hill before you."

Racket Rube had already gathered his reins well in hand, placed his foot upon the brake, for he knew well the danger of the hill descending into the valley.

As he did so however there came a shot from among the rocks, and as Lieutenant Wainwright fell back upon the top of the coach the outlaw, ironed as he was, leaped from the box to the ground and disappeared in the thicket on the side of the trail, just as half a dozen men sprung into view, on either side of the coach, and began a scattering fire over the heads of those on the box, while loud came the orders to Racket Rube to come to a halt.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE BLACK HORSE BRAVOS.

AMONG the rocks where the outlaws had appeared so unexpectedly and suddenly to fire upon the coach, a group of men were gathered, eight in number.

They were a hard-looking lot, bearded heavily, wearing their hair long, dressed in black pants, top-boots, shirts of sable silk, and sombreros of jetty hue.

They were all armed with revolvers, knife and a rifle each, and the spurs upon their heels indicated that they were horsemen.

Back in a thicket, several hundred yards away were a dozen horses, eight of them saddled and bridled, the others carrying pack-saddles.

Every horse was jet-black, and each one was a splendid animal.

One man of the group among the rocks stood in the trail, as though on sentinel duty.

The other's were seated upon their blankets, four of them playing cards, one brushing up his weapons, a third asleep and a fourth reading a well-worn novel.

"Say, pards, the old hearse is late to-day," said one.

"Yes, but it must be along soon, so let us git ready, though the cap'n gin'rally does matters so prime all alone we hain't often needed now."

"Well, we'll be ready anyhow."

With this the men ceased their various occupations, rolled up their blankets, put away their cards, book and other work, and sat grouped together awaiting with great patience the warning of their sentinel that the coach was coming.

"It's half an hour late," said one, looking at a watch.

"I hopes nothing has happened to the chief."

"I hopes not."

"He's too venturesome, halting the hearse all alone."

"Yas, some day he'll get bit, you bet."

"Not as long as the folks believes he has men ter back him."

"What's the cap'n's idee in playing a lone hand, I'd like ter know!"

"Maybe he gits things that way he don't have ter divvy on, see?"

"I thinks he deals a squar' hand, pard."

"Then he sh'd let us all chip inter ther game."

"Come, men, no slandering ther cap'n, for he's square clean through, and he only has us here to be sure of stopping the hearse."

"If he fails, then we can hold her up, and it's easy enough for him, where we always hold out, to skip across the turn and let us know, as he has done time and again before."

"But he has not come yet."

"The coach may be delayed."

"Or maybe something has happened to the captain, for he could come here easily before the coach got around by the trail."

A whistle from the sentinel commanded silence at once.

"Take your places, men, for the coach is coming," called out the sentinel.

"Where is the captain?"

"I don't know."

"He should have been here."

"If he has held the coach up, yes."

"Well, he was there for that purpose."

"Well, the coach is coming, and as the captain has not appeared, we must halt her."

"Sure."

"Into position, men, for don't you hear the rumble of the wheels?"

The eight men now took position among the rocks upon each side of the trail.

They were right upon the brow of the mountain spur, and where the trail began to descend upon its winding way to the valley a mile below.

The trail was narrow and rocky, here and there dangerous, and it was only a skillful driver that dared take six horses down it at night, and so the run over that part of the trail had been scheduled for daylight, though now and then Racket Rube had been forced to take the drive by night—yes, and in the blackest of nights, too, and in a storm.

But, then, Racket Rube was the best driver on the border, and those under his charge had no fear of the result, if they knew aught of his skill as a manipulator of the ribbons over a six-horse team.

When he put his foot on the brake at the top of the hill, there it had to remain until the valley was reached.

The coach came in sight, and there came a low, but startled exclamation from the men in ambush.

They saw the horse of their chief fastened alongside one of the leaders of the team.

What was more they beheld Black Horse Bill seated on the box between an officer in uniform and Rube.

They saw at a glance also that their chief's hands were in irons.

This accounted for his not coming across the cut, as was his wont, to tell them that he had held up the coach.

He had, as one of the men expressed it in a whisper:

"Bit off more'n he could chew that time."

He was a prisoner, that was certain.

This would not do, and he must be rescued.

The man who had reproved the others for doubting the captain slowly raised his revolver.

He was known as the dead-shot of the band, and his aim was at Lieutenant Wainwright.

So great was the surprise of the outlaws, at the position in which they beheld their chief, that the coach was allowed to reach the hill and almost get past them before they acted.

Racket Rube had placed his foot upon the brake, and had gathered his reins in hand for the perilous drive, when the shot came which struck Lieutenant Wainwright in the breast, causing him to fall backward upon the top of the coach.

At the same instant the chief leaped to the ground, and with a yell at his leaders Racket Rube raised his foot from the brake and sent the team flying down the hill toward the valley.

CHAPTER L.

THE COACH COMES IN.

THE coach was behind time in reaching the fort.

It was due at four o'clock in the afternoon, and from that on until five, but the last-named hour had passed and it had not come.

The sentinel on the fort lookout did not report it in sight, and his view extended along the trail for three miles.

General Wesley was anxious, more so, perhaps, than any other one, unless it was Captain DeLong.

Those who knew that Lieutenant Wainwright was to return on that coach felt the greatest anxiety.

With his wife and Gabrielle Garland, Captain DeLong walked over to headquarters.

The general greeted them cordially, and they took seats upon the piazza where they could see the stage trail for a mile and a half.

At last Gabrielle Garland asked:

"General, what is keeping the coach?"

"It is but an hour behind, Miss Gabrielle."

"Does that often happen, sir?"

"Well, not when Racket Rube drives, for he is as punctual as clock-work."

"Something may have happened to detain it then?"

"Possibly some detention beyond the rough trail, Miss Gabrielle."

"You expect Lieutenant Wainwright back on this coach, do you not, sir?"

Gabrielle Garland being a beautiful girl, and worth a million, could ask any question with impunity, when others might have hesitated to do so.

"Yes, he was to return to-day."

"Where is Dashing Charlie, sir?"

"He left the day after the lieutenant did."

"There is some comfort in that."

"How do you find it, Miss Gabrielle?" asked the general with a smile.

"Well, sir, I reason it out that as Lieutenant Wainwright went upon a mission of great danger you sent Dashing Charlie and his Deadshots, to be a protection to him, should he get into trouble."

"No, Miss Gabrielle, I sent Lieutenant Wainwright upon his mission, as he volunteered for it, but Dashing Charlie asked to go on a scout, but said nothing as to where he was going or his intention; but I have had it reported to me that he took the stage trail."

"And did not go alone?"

"No; he carried with him eight of his Deadshots, I believe."

"Then I feel better for Lieutenant Wainwright."

"I assure you, Miss Gabrielle, if I had known your deep interest in Wainwright I would not have sent him away on such a mission."

"I had ordered Captain DeLong to hold himself ready for secret service, and he gladly acquiesced; but when Wainwright knew what it was, he frankly showed me that I was wrong in sending a married man and commander of a troop on a mission outside of his legitimate work and of such peril."

"He therefore volunteered, insisting that it was his right as my aide, and so I allowed him to go, and a noble act it was on his part."

"Now, let me repeat, had I known your interest in him, he should not have gone either."

"My dear General Wesley, let me tell you that my interest is only that of a friend, and for one who so nobly took Captain DeLong's place."

"I do not wish you to attribute my anxiety to other motives, for there is nothing between Lieutenant Wainwright and myself, I assure you, excepting the sincerest friendship, one which can never be more," and Gabrielle Garland spoke warmly.

"I am glad to feel that this is the case, Miss Gabrielle, for I assure you that the more I think of it, the more I regret the danger that I allowed him to venture into— Hal the sentinel has called out something to the officer of the day!"

A few minutes after a sergeant approached and said:

"The sentinel reports the coach in sight, sir, and coming at full speed."

Soon after, into the view of those on the piazza of headquarters dashed the coach.

The coach was coming, as the sentinel reported, at the full speed of the horses, and the driver was seen to be using his whip, although now within plain view of the fort.

There was no one visible in pursuit, so what could this great speed mean? was the query upon every lip.

Along the level trail on the plain came the coach, the horses at a run, and the whip waving above their heads to urge them on.

The road was a good one, but the speed caused the coach to sway at times.

A leader stumbled and half fell, but the driver quickly recovered him.

Then one of the wheel-horses nearly went down, but was as quickly held up and forced on.

Up the slope leading to the fort came the running team of six horses, and the gates were thrown open into the fort to admit them, though the cause of the haste could not be discovered.

As they drew nearer, the horses were seen to be covered with foam and staggering with fatigue, while now, to the amazement of every one, it was discovered that the driver on the box was not Racket Rube.

It was Dashing Charlie that held the reins.

CHAPTER LI.

RACKET RUBE'S BRAVE FLIGHT.

WHEN Lieutenant Wainwright fell back upon the coach-top, shot in the breast, and Black Horse Bill leaped to the ground, Racket Rube took in the situation at a glance.

He was a man quick to act, and he did act.

The lieutenant was not killed, and he might not be mortally wounded.

If he stopped now, the officer would be killed, perhaps the outlaws would kill him, as he had sided against the chief.

Rube now understood the peculiar look upon the face of the outlaw chief.

He did not have his men with him, but they were in ambush upon the trail, and he knew the chances were of his being rescued.

The driver decided to save the officer and himself if in the power of man to do so.

He saw that the outlaws were not mounted, and he remembered the old saying that "a stern chase is a long one."

So he yelled at his horses, raised his foot from the brake, drew the lieutenant back upon the box and set off down the hill at break-neck speed.

The horses had had a long rest, and they were urged to go, so down they went at a run.

They were handled in a most masterly manner by Racket Rube, who then and there showed his claim to being called the best driver on the Overland.

He swung the coach around the bends, grazed the edge of a precipice now and then, brought the team to a slower pace when it was sure death to go rapidly, and then sent them along again at full speed.

The outlaws had fired upon him with their revolvers, then with their rifles, and the bullets had crashed into the rear of the coach, but had done no damage, more than slightly wounding one of the horses.

Some of the outlaws had started in pursuit of the coach, but they saw they could not overtake it on foot.

"A hundred dollars to the man who brings it to a halt!"

It was the outlaw chief who commanded the pursuit, and the men ran for their horses in great haste.

But the animals were in a thicket three hundred yards away, and the run there and back to the trail, with the start of a few moments before the pursuit was ordered by Black Horse Bill, gave the coach a start of nearly a third of a mile.

But down the hill went the men as fast as they dared ride, and on thundered the coach.

Deserted by his men now, for the reward offered had stimulated each man to give chase, Black Horse Bill watched the pursuit, for he was handicapped and could do nothing.

Soon he saw a man coming back.

There was no need to ask him what was the matter, for his scratched face and torn clothes showed that his horse had gone down with him.

"Here, Ben, get these infernal irons off of my wrists, if you can," said the chief.

It was no easy task, as Ben soon discovered, groaning the while from the injuries he had received.

Suddenly firing was heard down in the valley.

"They have caught the coach, Ben."

"Listen, sir!"

Both listened and the chief turned pale as did the man with him.

"There's more shots there, sir, than our boys could fire."

"Yes, they have been attacked."

"Come, let us go to where the pack-horses are, for I am helpless and you are in a bad way."

"We will retreat to the cave and the men must look after themselves."

"They'll come there, sir, if they get away."

"It's a running fight now."

"Yes, and they are coming this way."

"Quick, Ben, or we will be taken."

"Curses on this day's work."

Away ran the chief and the man with him, the pack-horses were reached, and aided to

mount, Black Horse Bill led the way, Ben following with the pack-animals.

The firing had ceased now, but soon after hoof-falls were heard behind them.

Suddenly a man dashed into view riding at full speed, for he could get along faster than the chief with the pack-horses.

"It's Fritz," said Ben.

"Ho, Fritz, what's the matter?" cried the chief, still retreating.

"We ran upon a snag, sir, for Dashing Charlie and his men were in the valley."

"Burnett is dead, so is Allen, and two more of the boys are wounded, but they are coming along."

"And are Dashing Charlie and his men pursuing you?"

"No, sir, they stopped at the hill when our boys turned at bay."

"There come the men now," and four of the outlaw horsemen came in sight riding rapidly.

They soon overtook the retreating chief and two of them were found to be slightly wounded, while as many more had been killed.

They reported, however, that Dashing Charlie and his men had not followed up the hill.

"How many men had Dashing Charlie?" asked the chief.

No one knew, and then the outlaw leader said:

"Well, we will press on with all speed to the retreat, where I can get rid of these accursed irons."

CHAPTER LII.

RUNNING AGAINST A SNAG.

THE outlaws had reported truthfully to their chief, for they had, in their pursuit of the coach, so to speak, "run against a snag" in Dashing Charlie, and two of his Deadshots.

Rube had held on down the hill at the same desperate speed in his endeavor to escape.

Could he but reach the level valley he could lay the whip on his team, and it would take a fast horse to overtake them.

But down the steep hill trail they could gain upon him, as he dared not drive the coach as fast as they could ride.

But there were bold riders among the outlaws, and they held on too at a tremendous speed in chase of the coach.

The result was that they began to gain, and as the coach neared the base of the mountain, they were coming up well behind.

Around the last bend swept Racket Rube, and a short distance more and the valley trail would be reached.

He turned and glanced behind him and saw one man close up to the coach, and he must soon dash alongside.

Rube grasped the reins in one hand, drew his revolver and fired.

Down went the man, and his horse, relieved of his rider, sped by the coach.

But Racket Rube had to attend to his team once more, and put aside his pistol, and on came the other outlaws, bunched together now, as though for safety.

Another hundred yards and the coach would enter the timber, and then it would be a question of speed, Rube well knew.

But suddenly there rung out a wild battle-cry, just as the outlaws opened fire with their revolvers upon the brave driver.

They saw Racket Rube reel badly, as though about to fall, and then draw rein as the coach reached the valley.

But that wild battle-cry had startled them, and wheeling their horses they began to fly up the mountain trail, and as they ran they emptied their rifles.

The cause of this sudden retreat was at seeing three men dash out of the timber to the rescue of the coach.

The horseman in advance they knew but too well.

It was Dashing Charlie, the scout.

On he came like the wind, and with his two comrades abreast.

At the volley fired by the outlaws the chief of scouts' horse went down, but he caught himself nimbly as he fell, and called out:

"After them, pards, but do not go too far."

Then he gave his well-known battle-cry again, threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

One of the outlaws fell from his saddle, and the others pressed on the harder, while Diamond, Dan and Kit Kirby, who were in chase, also opened fire, wounding two more of the Black Horse Bravos.

Dismounted as he was, Dashing Charlie quickly returned to the coach.

There sat poor Racket Rube still upon the box and holding his reins with one hand, for the other hung useless by his side, and he had another wound as well.

"Yer saved me, Dashing Charlie, me and ther lieutenant, ef we don't both hand in our chips arter all," he said, faintly.

"You are wounded badly, Rube, and what! so is the lieutenant."

"I only wish I could have come up sooner, and had all my men with me, but they are away upon the valley trail."

"I heard the coach coming, so rode to meet

it, for I knew you were being pursued, to drive down this trail as you did.

"Ah! you are suffering while I talk.

"I will call the boys back."

He gave three sharp cries, and then, springing upon the box, aided the driver to the ground.

"Poor fellow, you are twice hit, and I am not surgeon enough to do you much good."

"The lieutenant is worse off than I am, Charlie.

"See to him."

The scout sprung up to the box again and glanced at the officer.

His face was white and he lay back unable to move, though he said, faintly:

"I guess I've got my death-wound, Dashing Charlie."

"I will put you and Rube in the coach, lieutenant, and drive with all speed to the fort, for the surgeon will pull you through, and you both need his services at once."

He lifted the officer tenderly down from the box, and, placing him by the side of Rube, opened the coach door and began to arrange the cushions for the two men.

As he did so Kit Kirby and Diamond Dan rode up.

"We could have caught 'em, Charlie, if we had not heard your recall."

"I needed you, Kit."

"You are something of a doctor, so help me here with the lieutenant and Rube, while you, Dan, water the horses and get all ready for a start."

"Catch that loose horse also, for he is a good one."

And Dashing Charlie referred to the horse whose rider Rube had shot.

The wounds were dressed as well as possible, and then Dashing Charlie said:

"We'll put them inside, and you, Rube, ride with them to keep them steady, for I am going to drive to the fort in the best time ever made there."

"Dan, you remain here and bury those two dead outlaws, after which I will strike the trail of the others and mark it well, for I shall start back to night with some men to follow you."

"Now I am off."

And, a skillful driver, Dashing Charlie gathered up his reins and sent the team off on their long run to the fort.

CHAPTER LIII.

DASHING CHARLIE'S MAD DRIVE.

WHEN those at the fort saw Dashing Charlie on the box of the coach, they felt that some tragedy had occurred.

The scout did not halt when the coach was within the stockade, but dashed on to the quarters of Lieutenant Wainwright, calling out as he did so:

"Please send the surgeon to Lieutenant Wainwright's quarters with all haste."

As he drew rein there the soldiers who had followed threw open the coach door and the officer was lifted out by them, aided by Kit Kirby, who said:

"He's got it bad, pard, so go easy."

"All right, Kit?"

"Yes, Charlie."

Away dashed the foam-covered horses to the fort hospital, and there halting the burly form of Racket Rube was tenderly lifted out and carried in to be placed in the care of the assistant surgeon.

Then the team was left with Kit Kirby to be taken to the Overland stables, while Dashing Charlie was joined by Captain DeLong, who walked rapidly with him to headquarters to report to the general.

Mrs. DeLong and Gabrielle Garland were still there, the captain having hastened away to learn the news, and Dashing Charlie said quickly:

"I have to report, sir, that I came upon the coach driving at full speed down the Crows' Roost trail, and pursued by the Black Horse Bravos."

"Lieutenant Wainwright was seriously, if not fatally wounded, and was upon the box with Racket Rube, who was also twice wounded, but could drive no further after meeting Kirby, Diamond Dan and myself."

"We checked the pursuit of the outlaws, killing one, while Rube had brought down another, and as I saw that the two wounded men needed the surgeon's care, I drove on here with all speed, sir, Kit Kirby caring for them inside the coach."

"I left Diamond Dan to bury the dead and follow and mark the outlaws' trail."

"Both the lieutenant and Racket Rube are unconscious now, so I know nothing of what they passed through, but the horse hitched to one of the leaders of the coach is the animal belonging to Black Horse Bill, I am confident."

"That is all that I can report of the affair, sir, and I am sorry I did not reach the scene sooner, but was not sure where the outlaws would hold up the coach."

The scout's report was delivered in a clear, terse manner, and General Wesley said in response:

"As usual, Dashing Charlie, you have done

well, and I feel that you did all that lay in your power."

"You drove here at a tremendous speed, as your horses showed, and Lieutenant Wainwright and Rube will owe their lives to you, if they recover."

"I will go and see how my aide is, and Mrs. DeLong, will you and Miss Gabrielle await here the return of the captain and myself?"

"Certainly, general, and remember to command me if I can be of any service to poor Wainwright," said Mrs. DeLong.

"I will do so, madam."

"Emmett, will you remain and tell the ladies more explicitly what has occurred?"

"I would, sir, if there was more that I knew to tell; but I wish to at once return, sir, with half a dozen of my men, for if pushed hard now we may either capture the Black Horse Bravos or drive them from the border."

"I leave the scamps to your tender mercies, Emmett," was the general's answer, and the three walked away together.

The general and Captain DeLong went at once to the quarters of the wounded officer.

The surgeon met them at the door and said:

"I have cut out the bullet, general, from under the right shoulder blade."

"It passed through the lung, and though most dangerous may not prove fatal."

From there they went to the hospital, and the assistant surgeon made the same report about Rube the driver, that one of his wounds was dangerous, but not necessarily fatal.

He was unconscious, but would soon come round all right.

And, after ordering everything done for them, as the general and captain returned to headquarters they saw Dashing Charlie riding out of the fort followed by half-a-dozen of his Deadshots, and bound for the scene where he had left Diamond Dan to follow the outlaws and break their trail.

"There goes one of the bravest and most tireless men I ever met, DeLong."

"He is, indeed, general; but it seems that poor Wainwright certainly met Black Horse Bill."

"Yes, and I wish we knew the result, for the outlaw must have been killed as his horse was brought in alongside the leaders of the coach," answered the general.

CHAPTER LIV.

AFTER THE BRAVOS.

DIAMOND DAN did not particularly relish the duty he was left to do by Dashing Charlie, but he was not one to spend his time in regrets, so set to work to catch the loose horse of the slain outlaw.

This he did and he found the animal a splendid one.

The other horse which had lost his rider had dashed on up the hill with the outlaws and had been caught by them, so that he came in well, saddled and bridled as he was for the Bravo Ben, who had given his horse to the chief.

Having staked the captured horse out with his own, Diamond Dan went to where the first outlaw lay.

He had been shot through the heart, and was stone dead.

"I'll see if he has the dust ter pay for his funeral expenses," muttered Diamond Dan, and he began to search the dead body.

"Waal, I'm glad Charlie left me behind, for this fellow is a pigeon worth plucking," he said, as he began to search the body.

"A pocket full of spare change, and a buckskin belt heavy with gold."

"Yes, there's several hundred dollars in this belt."

"And a ring that was tuk from a gal's finger, I guesses, a watch and chain, breastpin, and his revolvers, rifle and knife."

"Yes, he'll do, and he pays well for his burying."

Taking the things and storing them in his saddle-pocket, the scout shouldered the body and bore it to a spot in the timber where he had determined to dig the graves.

Then he went to the body of the other outlaw.

"How'll he pan out, I wonder?"

Diamond Dan lost no time in finding out, and to his delight discovered that the gold belt of the second outlaw contained several times as much gold as the first one did.

"He was either not dividing profits squar' with t'others, or he stole their money, or—Ah! this tells it, for he was lucky at keards, for here is his Penitentiary Prayer Book."

"That means he raked in ther dust o' his pards," and Diamond Dan took the cards he had found and put them in his own pocket, while he said:

"I'll keep 'em for luck."

The body of the second outlaw was also taken to the valley, and a blanket from the saddle of the captured horse to wrap them in, for the scout intended to bury them as decently as he could.

He dug a grave with his bowie-knife, and then placing the bodies in it side by side, spread the blanket over them.

The dirt was then thrown in and rocks piled

over it, after which Diamond Dan mounted the outlaw's horse, and leading his own, said:

"I guess there's no need of worrying about a trail, for you'll go whar yer belong, horse."

The horse was jet-black and a very fine one, while he was well equipped, for the outlaws were all splendidly mounted and armed.

He set off up the trail as though he wished to show the scout that he was not mistaken in him.

Coming to the group of rocks where the Black Horse Bravos had been in ambush, he turned off to the left and went straight to the thicket where the horses had been in hiding while their riders were waiting for the coach.

The tracks there revealed to Diamond Dan that the horses had been hitched there, and on more than one occasion.

"Now, good horse, it is for you to find the way your companions have gone," said Diamond Dan.

He gave the horse his rein and he went off briskly through the timber.

He had gone for a mile when they came to a spot where the earth was soft, leaving the first trail visible.

Here the scout halted and dismounted.

He examined the ground carefully and with an experienced eye.

"Just ten horses passed along here."

"That means ten outlaws, I guess."

"But two outlaws were killed, and the horse of one of them ran back and was caught by the band."

"Waal, nine or ten outlaws, of the Black Horse Bravo kind, is a leetle too rich for my blood."

"But I kin follow them along for some time yet afore dark, after I has gone back and marked ther trail fer Dashing Charlie ter come in by, for there is no tracks in this ground behind me, and but for catching this horse what knows ther way, I'd been left, I guess."

With this he rode back to the stage trail and marked the way from there on to as far as he had gone.

From there on, the ground showed the outlaws' trail distinctly, so he did not mark it.

CHAPTER LV.

THE DEADSHOTS ON THE TRAIL.

DASHING CHARLIE left the fort, anxious to hold on to the scene where he had left Diamond Dan, camp there, and be ready to follow the trail of the Black Horse Bravos with the coming of dawn.

He believed that if he could follow them up hotly he might do what had never been accomplished before, find their retreat, and either wipe out the band or capture them.

That the horse of their chief was hitched to one of the leaders of the coach team, and the saddle, bridle and weapons of Black Horse Bill were in the coach, was proof to Dashing Charlie, as he regarded it, that the outlaw leader had been killed by Lieutenant Wainwright or Racket Rube, before the flight of the stage down the mountain trail.

Kit Kirby had told him that neither Racket Rube or the lieutenant had been able to say a word about the affair, so that what had happened could not be found out.

Dashing Charlie left the fort with six men, and two of them were at once dispatched to different points, to find the scouts he had first gone out with, and order them to meet him at the foot of the trail leading down the mountain from Crow's Roost.

The chief of scouts and his men arrived an hour after dark at the rendezvous.

There was a moon a week old and they saw there the graves of the two dead outlaws buried by Diamond Dan.

Going into camp, just as they had supper ready one of the couriers came in with the other men he had been sent to find.

The other courier followed soon after.

"Now, when we find Diamond Dan, I will have my Deadshot Dozen, and will not fear to follow on the trail of three times that number of outlaws," said Dashing Charlie.

Kit Kirby had also returned with the scouts, and as they all sat around the camp-fire within view of the graves of the two outlaws, they discussed the affair of the day and what had probably been the fate of the captain of the Bravos, Black Horse Bill.

It was just coming day when the scouts awoke and started to prepare for the trail.

They went on up the mountain trail, marking the places where Racket Rube had swung the coach around the different bends and over the many perilous spots he had gone by, and loud was the praise bestowed upon his driving, and all wondered how he had made it.

They came to the rocks at the head of the hill, and there discovered a stick in the trail with a slip of paper upon it.

It read:

"The hoss of ther dead outlaw is doin' ther trail in, for ther' is no tracks on this hill ter foller."

"Come write erlong, for I will mark ther way plain."

DIAMOND DAN.

The scout kept his word, for he did mark the way most distinctly until they came to where the tracks were plainly visible.

Counting the tracks Dashing Charlie said:

"We are about equal in numbers, if these tracks tell the truth and each horse carries a rider."

So on they went for several miles further; and then the trail descended into a valley where there were three streams flowing into, or rather forming, one.

The trail entered the single stream but did not appear on the other side.

"They have branched off up one of these shallow streams," said Dashing Charlie.

"Yes, but which one?" asked Kit Kirby.

This question could not be answered, and they set to work to divide their force into three squads, each one to follow up a stream for a certain distance, and, if the lost trail was found, to send a courier to acquaint the others with the fact.

That they found no indication there from Diamond Dan as to which way to go was proof that he was also at a loss and expected them to await his coming back.

But by dividing their force, they would one of the three be sure to meet the scout ahead of them.

Dashing Charlie took the center stream, and, though it was evident that the outlaws had gone along in the water to cover up their trail, there was no reason for the scouts to do so, and they therefore rode along the bank, a much quicker way of progress.

They pushed along at a uniform speed, and some ten miles had been gone over by Dashing Charlie's party with no trace of a trail having left the stream, when suddenly they came upon a dead horse.

"This animal was shot, and it belonged to the outlaws," said one of the scouts.

The animal was jet-black, had been stripped of his saddle and bridle, and had a bullet-wound in his head.

"I wonder if it was not the outlaw's horse which Diamond Dan captured?" said Dashing Charlie.

This was decided to be the case, and a search further up the stream discovered where the trail of two horses left it.

"This is the track of Diamond Dan's horse, for I know it well," said Dashing Charlie.

"It is, chief, but Dan has left us no guide."

"No; but we may find the trail marked further on; but, I wish I could account for that dead animal and the tracks of the two here, for Dan only had the outlaw's horse and his own."

And Dashing Charlie was growing anxious about the fate of the lone scout ahead.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE LOST TRAIL.

AS the tracks of the two horses again turned into the stream, Dashing Charlie did not send after the other squads, but left them to continue on and see what they could find.

Of one thing he was certain, and that was that he was on the trail of Diamond Dan, or at least the scout had surely come that way, for a certain peculiarity in the shape of one of the hoofs of the scout's horse could not be mistaken.

On they went once more until the stream wound into the mountains, passing through a canyon, the sides of which were high, rugged and fringed with trees.

There was no bank to follow here, and though the water was up to the skirts of the saddles they had to push through it.

Beyond the canyon, which was a mile in length, the stream broadened into a wide shallow creek flowing through a valley.

Here Dashing Charlie went into camp and sent couriers back to find the other two squads and see what they had discovered, and if they had made no discovery to come on and join him, for he was surely on Diamond Dan's track, and there was enough of a suspicious nature about the finding of the dead horse and seeing the two trails lead out of the stream and back into it, for him to feel that perhaps his scout had gotten into trouble of some kind.

At any rate he was as anxious now to discover Diamond Dan as he was the outlaws.

All the afternoon while waiting for the other squads, Dashing Charlie and his men searched the valley for some trace of a trail.

But in vain the search, for they not only could not find any, but some miles above, the creek ended in a cataract tumbling over a mountain precipice.

As the fall was some sixty feet in height, and the precipice completely ended the valley, there was a certainty that the outlaws could not have gone that way.

So there was nothing to be done but to return to the camp and await the coming of the other scouts.

Just before sunset one of the couriers returned with the squad of scouts he had been sent after.

They reported having followed the stream along its banks for twenty miles and discovered no trace of a trail leaving it.

As it led into a rocky bed and surging current, where no horse could have possibly followed the bed of the stream, and confident that none had followed it thus far and left it, they had just decided to cross the country toward Dashing

Charlie's position, when they saw the scout running after them.

"That settles that stream then," said Dashing Charlie.

"Now we will see what Kit Kirby has to report."

But Kit Kirby's squad did not put in an appearance that night.

The next morning, however, the courier sent after them came in with them, and all looked tired out.

"Well, Kit, what news?" asked Dashing Charlie.

"None, Charlie."

"We followed that stream right up into the mountains and to where no horse could possibly go, for we went along on foot to try and find a trail, but could not."

"There was no trace of a trail leaving the stream then on either bank?"

"Not a bird-track even, chief."

"Then this is the stream they came up."

"You have found their trail, then?" eagerly asked Kit Kirby.

"No, but I found a dead black horse upon the bank—the same animal, I take it, which Diamond Dan had captured."

"From there on for half a mile were the tracks of two horses, which came out of the water, and one track was that of Diamond Dan's horse."

"Now we have it."

"No, we have not, Kit, for the tracks re-entered the stream above an there we lost them."

"They did not come out again?"

"Nowhere that we could find."

"But it shows if Diamond Dan's horse, and two others, counting the dead one with a bullet in his head, came up the stream that far, they all came this way and they have some turning-off place which we cannot find, but must."

"Yes, for it looks bad for Diamond Dan."

"It does indeed, Kit, and I fear that the devils have got him in their clutches."

"It looks so, Charlie; but we must know."

"Yes, we must know," was the answer, and again the search was begun for a trail.

But in vain, for nowhere could it be found, nor any clue to how the outlaws had left the stream, or what had become of Diamond Dan.

That night, as the men sat around the campfire in the valley, there was a feeling of sadness resting upon all.

Diamond Dan was a favorite with every man in the League of Deadshots, and his mysterious disappearance could be accounted for in but one way.

"If he was not dead or a prisoner, he would have marked the trail as I told him to do," said Dashing Charlie, and in this all agreed.

"To-morrow," continued Dashing Charlie, "I wish every man to start out alone on the trail."

"We will each one and all of us search all day for some trace of a trail, and keep at it until nightfall, unless some one makes a discovery."

"At nightfall we will meet here again and report."

And the next day the whole force divided.

At night they began to drop into camp one by one, but no one had anything to report.

Then as the night came on all had come in but Dashing Charlie.

Morning came and he did not appear, and then every face paled, for what had become of their chief?

CHAPTER LVII.

THE DEADSHOTS IN DESPAIR.

THAT Dashing Charlie did not come into camp that night caused some, but not general, uneasiness among his men, for there were several who did not come in until long after night began, and it was near twelve o'clock before Kit Kirby reported.

But when the next morning dawned and he did not appear, his men began to feel the greatest anxiety regarding him.

They tried not to appear anxious, and several asserted that the chief of the Deadshots was a man who stuck to a clue like a bloodhound, once he got hold of it, and that was what had detained him.

But noon came and he did not put in an appearance.

The Deadshots did not wish to leave camp, for fear he would come in and need them at once, having made some discovery, and so they remained about all day.

But when night came and he did not come back, then the greatest anxiety was felt.

"What can it mean?" each one asked the other.

No one could answer the question.

"Diamond Dan, and now the chief," said Kit Kirby.

The morning came and then Kit Kirby, who was in command in the absence of Dashing Charlie, decided to make an effort to find the leader.

He called the men together and said that all but one would go in search of the chief.

That one was to remain in camp in case that Dashing Charlie did return.

The others were to go upon the trail of the chief of scouts and follow it wherever it led.

So they mounted and rode away.

They went to the spot where Dashing Charlie had parted with Kit Kirby, who had been the last one to see him.

"He said he was going to find Diamond Dan, sure," said Kit.

And then they took the trail of the missing chief.

It led across the valley to the foot-hills, then turned and followed around their base.

It came to the stream near the canyon through which it flowed.

There the chief had halted for his noonday lunch, and his horse had fed near him as the trail showed plainly.

From there the trail led to the stream and went down through the canyon without doubt.

But to be sure, half of the men went up the stream as far as the cataract, and were then to go on to the camp in the valley.

The others entered the stream, passed on down through the canyon, and dividing the force went on each bank as far down as the spot where the dead horse lay, and which had been a feast for the wolves and vultures.

Then Kit Kirby sent a man back to camp to bring the men on the next day, unless the chief had returned, and he with the others continued on to the spot where the three streams formed one large one.

Here they camped for the night, and the next day the others came down and joined them, having had no clue to the missing chief.

They remained encamped there until the next day, when Kit Kirby decided that it was best to return to the fort and report the mysterious disappearance of the chief and Diamond Dan.

"I will leave two men in hiding here and two more must go back to our camp."

"If we do not return from the fort within three days, then you can come there, for further search will be fruitless, unless the general sends us back with a troop of cavalry to camp here for a week and search every foot of ground."

So said Kit Kirby, and with the balance of the men not to be left behind, he started for the fort.

The return was made by the same trail they had come, and every track was closely examined.

But no new track was seen, nothing to indicate that the chief, Diamond Dan or the outlaws had gone back in that direction.

Reaching the Overland Trail where the outlaws had been lying in ambush, Kit Kirby decided to camp on the mountain for the night and see if any traces of a struggle could be found the next morning, for he felt sure that there had been one when Black Horse Bill was either killed or captured, for he believed that such was the case, as the lieutenant and Racket Rube had both been wounded and they had captured the horse of the lawless leader of the road-agents.

They went into camp near Mountain Spring, and awaited the coming of the next morning.

When daylight came they saw where the coach had been held up, and the trail showed but one trail.

There was where the one horse had been among the rocks, where the rider had stood, and there where he had ridden out to the side of the coach.

The tracks showed that the single horse, and the team, had stood in one place for quite a while, and from there to where the ambush of outlaws had occurred, was a couple of miles.

As he could make no other discovery, Kit Kirby reluctantly decided to return to the fort and report the loss of the Deadshots' chief and of Diamond Dan, and they at once set out on the trail homeward, hoping against hope that when they arrived they would find there the two missing men.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY.

A SHADOW seemed to fall upon all at the fort at the coming back of Lieutenant Calvin Wainwright and Racket Rube, both severely wounded, and the former hanging between life and death.

The lieutenant's wound was the most severe, but Racket Rube had been twice wounded, and he had lost a great deal of blood, and was very weak and unconscious when taken to the hospital.

"You must save the lives of both Wainwright and Racket Rube, at all hazards," the general had said to the two surgeons, and they intended to do so if they could by any skill or devotion on their part.

The next day after their arrival at the fort, both had fever, and Lieutenant Wainwright was delirious, while Racket Rube lay quiet, excepting for an occasional word to his team.

There was no end of offers to nurse the two men back to life, and though neither could partake of food, the wives of the officers sent many a delicacy to them, which of course fell into the hands of the hospital steward, who was anxious to encourage any kindness of that nature.

A man had been found, after some difficulty, to take Racket Rube's coach out on its run, provided he would be allowed an escort past Crow's Roost.

This was allowed by the general, and the coach went out empty, and returned the same way three days after, the escort meeting it at Crow's Roost again.

The coach showed that it had passed through a severe ordeal, for the back of it, the sides and the top were seamed with bullet-marks, even the wheels being cut here and there.

This showed through what a fire the lieutenant and Racket Rube had passed, and the wonder was that they were not killed.

The splendid black horse of the robber chief was kept in the stables, but he showed a vicious nature toward every one.

The saddle-pockets had been examined, and this ended any doubt as to whether they were the horse and saddle of Black Horse Bill, for there was a map of the country, skillfully drawn by himself, for it bore his name, and a pair of derringer pistols, bearing his name, engraved upon them, as the proof of their ownership.

Thus the days passed by until a week had gone, and great anxiety was felt for Dashing Charlie and his Deadshots.

Why did they remain away so long?

The place where they expected to find the Black Horse Bravos was not so far away from the fort, and yet no word had come from them since their departure.

Had they been ambushed and wiped out? was the question which was daily going around among the soldiers.

The week passed, and then General Wesley determined to send Captain DeLong and his troop out on a search for the Deadshots, for the captain urged that he might go.

The order had just been given when into the fort rode Kit Kirby and his men.

The scouts looked downcast indeed when they learned that Dashing Charlie had not returned, neither had Diamond Dan, and Lieutenant Wainwright and Racket Rube were still unable to give any account of the affair at Crow's Roost.

Kit Kirby then made his report to the general, and Captain DeLong at once begged that he might take his entire troop and go over the scenes.

The permission was promptly granted by General Wesley, and mounted upon fresh horses the scouts started on their return with the troopers.

On their way they met the four men left behind by Kit Kirby, but they could give no report of a favorable nature regarding the missing men.

But Captain DeLong kept on, and camped that night at Mountain Spring, going over the entire ground.

The next day the march was made to the valley where the Deadshots had camped when they had lost Dashing Charlie.

The well-picked bones of the horse were found on the way, but the trail of Diamond Dan's and the other animal had become obliterated.

The camp was made that night in the valley and the next day a thorough search was made by the entire troop of sixty men.

But in vain the search.

Not a trace of the Black Horse Bravos, the chief of scouts or Diamond Dan could be found.

With the deepest regret the captain started upon the return march to the fort, going again over the same ground, in the hope of making some discovery which had escaped them before.

But they returned to the fort as the Deadshots had done before, with no clew to the missing chief of scouts and Diamond Dan.

When Captain DeLong made his report to General Wesley, the latter seemed deeply pained and said:

"Well, DeLong, it is the work of that arch-fiend, as we now know him to be, Black Horse Bill."

"But is he not dead, sir?"

"Not a bit of it, for Rube has regained his senses and has told the whole story."

"And how is Wainwright, sir?"

"Still hovering between life and death, with the chances in favor of his recovery."

"That is good news, sir; but you were speaking of Racket Rube's report of the affair?"

"Yes, the scamp flatly refused my pardon."

"He is a confirmed scoundrel indeed, sir."

"Yes, and he held up the coach alone, and Wainwright played a most daring game upon him after his refusal of the pardon and made him a prisoner."

"They were bringing him to the fort in irons, when they were ambushed by the outlaw band, fired upon, and poor Wainwright was wounded; but Racket Rube drove on down the hill under fire, until they met Dashing Charlie and two of his men, and you know the balance."

"Then Black Horse Bill escaped after all, sir?"

"Yes; and beyond doubt led both Diamond Dan and Dashing Charlie into a trap."

"Do you think he would take their lives, sir?"

"I hardly know what to think, for the man must be mad."

"He did so much for us, and then, refusing my pardon for his services, acted like a friend toward Wainwright, and may seek to avenge

his clever capture upon Emmett and Diamond Dan."

"But the most mysterious thing about it all is how those outlaws could cover up their trail so that Dashing Charlie could not find it, and then both Diamond Dan and he should disappear and the Deadshots and your whole troop be unable to discover any clew to them."

"It is most mysterious that it is so, sir, but such is the fact, that no clew whatever can be found to this strange disappearance of Diamond Dan and Dashing Charlie, and as you say, general, I believe that Black Horse Bill is at the bottom of it," said Captain DeLong.

CHAPTER LIX.

DIAMOND DAN ENTRAPPED.

WHEN Diamond Dan continued on the trail of the Black Horse Bravos, he reached the scene of the three streams flowing into one.

He saw that the only way for the outlaws to go there, as they did not cross, was to continue on up one of the streams.

Which one they took he did not know and could not guess, for he had no trace of a trail to guide him.

So he determined to take first one stream and then the other, following them up to where he saw that the outlaws had left the water.

He could have gone on more rapidly on the bank, than in the water, but that would have left a trail which Dashing Charlie and his Deadshots would be sure to follow.

So he took the bed of the stream as the outlaws had done.

He rode on up to a bend, where a thicket grew, and where a large tree, blown up by the roots by a severe wind, had fallen half across the stream.

As he bowed his head to go under it he suddenly heard a swish and was encircled by a lariat and dragged from his saddle into the stream.

His horse did not run away from him, the black horse which he had been riding, and realizing that the water had wet his weapons so they would not fire, and until they could be reloaded with dry powder from his flask, that he knew was dry, and that he was disarmed, as it were completely, he leaped into his saddle and attempted to dash away.

But as he went up the bank a shot rung out and his horse dropped dead beneath him.

The animal fell heavily and upon the scout, and before he could extricate himself he saw a man run down the trunk of the fallen tree and cover him with a rifle.

"Surrender, sir, or you are a dead man," cried the one who thus stood over him.

"That is the only thing I kin do, pard, so I throws up my hand, and the game is yourn."

"But what have you ag'in' me now, when you was so friendly with me and Dashing Charlie when you saved us from the Injuns?"

"You are Diamond Dan, one of Dashing Charlie's Deadshots?"

"That's what they calls me, though I never was christened by that name."

"You are on my trail to kill me?"

"No, I hoped to catch and reform yer, Pard Black Horse Bill."

"Yes, as that accursed officer did by offering me a pardon and then entrapping me."

"See! I wear one of his manacles upon my wrist yet, but the other I broke," and he held up his hand and Diamond Dan saw the wrist encircled by a steel handcuff to which hung a few links of a broken chain.

"Well, pard, you well-nigh did for him, if yer didn't quite kill him."

"I'm glad of it, for he played that pardon game just to entrap me."

"Well, that's your quarrel with him; but what has yer ag'in' me?"

"I intend to kill you."

"Lordy! don't talk so rash, for you wouldn't kill a man you was so friendly with a short while ago."

"I have no friends, know no friendships."

"I live by hate alone, and you dogged me here."

"You sought to trail me to my lair, and then go back and fetch Dashing Charlie and his Deadshots to capture us and hang us."

"Waal, I admit hanging is none too good for yer," was the answer of Diamond Dan.

"Oh, yes, you would like to see me hanged, no doubt."

"But, fortunately, I remained behind my men to see if some of you Deadshots were not tracking us."

"I saw you coming, and I caught you most cleverly."

"You did fer a fact, yanked me out of the saddle, give me a bath and kilt my horse, all for no extra charge."

"The horse belonged to one of my men whom you killed."

"No, pard, I didn't kill him, though I would have done so if I'd hev got half a chance."

"And you would kill me too?"

"Now you has declared yourself as no longer my friend, I'd like ter git a chance at yer."

"You never will, for you are my prisoner, and that is equivalent to death."

"Waal, pard, you holds trump keerds, so I says nothing ag'in' it."

"Well, hold your hands behind your back."

Diamond Dan could not but obey, yet he was on the alert for any chance to escape that might present itself.

The outlaw chief then bound his hands securely behind his back with his lariat, and taking the saddle and bridle off of the dead horse, put them upon Diamond Dan's, then ordering him to mount, and aiding him to do so.

He mounted his own horse then, and with the stake-line of the animal ridden by Diamond Dan in his grasp, he rode back into the water and continued on up the stream toward the valley where Dashing Charlie and his Deadshots went into camp on the following day.

When they reached the deep water, flowing rapidly through the canyon, the chief dropped back to his side and said:

"Now I tell you frankly you are doomed to die; but as I have often escaped death myself, you may do so, and hence I will run no chances, so will blindfold you, that you may not see where I take you."

Resistance was useless, and so Diamond Dan was perfectly quiet, and submitted to having his eyes securely bandaged, after which the outlaw chief said:

"Now I will take you to my den, the home of Black Horse Bill and his Bravos."

CHAPTER LX.

DASHING CHARLIE IN THE TOILS.

WHEN Dashing Charlie separated from Kit Kirby in the valley, each to go his different way, the chief of scouts meditated for some time as to what was the best course for him to pursue.

He had the name of being one of the best scouts and trailers upon the frontier, and as chief of scouts he felt a just pride in wishing to be the one to solve the secret, to find the hiding-place of the Black Horse Bravos.

That they hid themselves most thoroughly, and cleverly covered up their tracks, he was compelled to admit.

But then he had reason to know that Black Horse Bill was a very extraordinary man, and he laid to his strategy, cunning and pluck the skillful movements of the band.

"I will go back to the place where we saw the dead horse and start from there."

"The turning-off place lies between that spot and the valley I am sure."

"Yes, it could branch off nowhere else."

"I will go down one bank and up the other, taking my time about it, and if I don't make a discovery I shall be very much surprised and disappointed."

So saying Dashing Charlie started upon the work before him.

He went on foot, leading his horse and going down one side of the stream.

He noted every spot where a man or horse could leave the water and passed on down to a spot below where he had seen the dead horse.

He observed a few vultures and wolves still hanging about the well-picked bones, as though in loving remembrance of the feast they had enjoyed.

It was in the afternoon when he got to the spot, and riding some distance below he camped for his dinner.

All about his camp he searched thoroughly, but finding no trace of a trail, mounted and rode into the stream.

His intention was to follow in the water-bed up to the spot where the trail of the horses turned out, and then re-enter the stream again and keep on to the valley by it, examining every foot of the bank.

The tree half across the stream he had noticed before, and being in the water now he would have to ride under it.

Having been blown down in a late storm its foliage was still green and very dense, and the scout saw no danger lurking within its shelter as he drew near.

But there was an eye upon him he little dreamed of, for a man had seen him far up the valley, coming along slowly and searching every foot of the way as he came.

The man had been seated at the base of the tree, but now ran nimbly up the trunk and concealed himself among the leaves.

He saw the scout approach slowly on the other bank, and seemed to divine his intention.

He observed him halt and look across to where the vultures and wolves were, and then pass on down the stream.

Twice he raised his rifle, but each time lowered it.

He could have killed Dashing Charlie with the greatest of ease, for he was within a hundred feet of him.

The watcher saw the scout halt for his noon-day meal, then search about, and afterward mount and begin to ride up the stream.

"It is just what I felt that he would do," he muttered, and he made his lariat fast to a limb of the tree.

On came the scout, little dreaming of the danger lurking overhead.

He bent in his saddle to pass under the fallen tree, glanced up into the foliage, and passed on.

He had gotten thirty feet away when suddenly the lasso coil was launched unerringly from the tree, the noose settled over the scout's body, pinioning his arms to his side, and as the startled horse sprang forward he was dragged backward from his saddle into the stream.

But for falling into the water he would have been badly hurt, so heavily did he fall upon his back.

The man in the tree gave a cry of triumph, dragged in the slack of the lariat quickly, and as the current had borne the scout now directly beneath him, and he had managed to struggle to his feet, he called out, sharply:

"Resist, Dashing Charlie, and you are a dead man."

"Come, no nonsense, for every dog must have his day."

Dashing Charlie was powerless to resist.

His arms were pinned close to his side, and the lasso having met, did not slip, but held them firm.

Then, too, his weapons were useless, wet as they were, and so he stood half-waist deep in the water, and glanced up at his captor, while he said:

"Yes, pard, you are the dog that has to-day."

"Mine will come later."

"You are wise not to make a row."

"March for the shore, and I'll be with you, and remember, my rifle is ready for use."

The scout obeyed, and as he reached the shore the man came down the tree-trunk and joined him.

"By Heaven! you are Black Horse Bill," cried the scout.

"At your service, Dashing Charlie," was the cool reply of the outlaw chief.

CHAPTER LXI.

CAPTOR AND CAPTIVE.

"Now, Dashing Charlie, I know that brave as you are, you value life," said the outlaw when he drew near his prisoner, whom he still kept covered with his rifle.

"Oo, yes," was the indifferent reply, though the scout was far from feeling the indifference he assumed.

"I will kill you as I would a snake, if you attempt any trickery with me."

"I do not doubt it, now, though you did lead me to believe, when we were hunting Indians together, that you were friendly to me."

"I am no man's friend, acknowledge no friendships, for I am for myself alone."

"You were hunting me, and have found me, only under different circumstances from what you had hoped."

"It is a case of turn about is fair play, Black Horse Bill."

"My chance will come some day when I have you at the end of a rope, only the rope will be about your neck."

"I doubt it, in fact I know the day will never come."

"But now obey me, as some of your men may come straggling this way soon."

"You know where they are?"

"Oh, yes, camped in the valley above the canyon and now on the search for the Black Horse Bravos."

"Well, what is your pleasure with me?"

"First to tie you."

"Now see if I do not do it well."

He wound the wet lariat again and again about the scout's arms and body, until resistance was utterly out of the question, for he was as useless to aid himself as though he was in a box.

"Now I'll get your horse for you," and making him fast to a tree he went up the stream to where the horse still stood, grazing on the bank.

He was led back and Dashing Charlie was then securely blindfolded, with the remark:

"This is the way I did your friend."

"What friend?"

"One of your men."

"Which one?"

"Diamond Dan."

"He is your prisoner, then?" said Dashing Charlie, with regret.

"He is."

"When did you capture him?"

"The day after the affair with the coach."

"Where?"

"Right here, for this tree has served me well."

"You entrapped him as you did me?"

"Exactly."

"Where is he now?"

"Where I intend to take you."

"Where is that?"

"In my den."

"Ah!"

"What does that mean?"

"I feel honored."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"I think so much of those who are my guests, I never allow them to leave me."

"If you can help it."

"Oh, trust me for that."

"Now, as you cannot see, you may mount your horse, and I will do the same, for as I am afoot, we must ride double."

"It will be a heavy load for a horse, two such men as we are."

"A heavy load of sin, you mean; but he must carry his burden."

"Let me walk."

"No, I wish no trails left, and that is what you are after."

The scout smiled at being read so easily, and then said:

"I am ready."

He was aided to mount, and the outlaw chief rode in the saddle.

The horse bore his double load well, and was moved on up the stream.

He went slowly, Dashing Charlie trying to gauge the distance as well as he could and not see, for the outlaw chief had blindfolded him well.

Suddenly the horse stopped, was moved a moment after quickly to one side and forced into a lot of thick bushes growing on the edge of the bank and overhanging the water.

"This is a rough way to go through bushes," said Dashing Charlie.

"See here, scout, I am a desperate man, and I swear to you that I will do as I say, if you do not heed me."

"Two of your men are coming, and we are hiding here."

"If you know anything you are aware that this is the point of my bowie-knife against your throat, right at the jugular vein, seal feel it prick you, there!"

"Now if you speak a word I shall drive this knife into your throat, yes, if you make the slightest sign or sound to betray our presence here."

"Then you will die, and I can readily drop your two men with my rifle."

"Do you understand?"

"I do."

"I am not one to trifle with, so beware."

Dashing Charlie felt the sharp point of the blade against his throat.

In truth it was really cutting into the flesh with some pain, and so as to cause the blood to flow.

He knew that the man would be as good as his word, and so he dared not make a sound.

Two of his men, the outlaw had said, and they must pass within a few yards of him.

Nearer came the scouts, one upon one side of the stream, the other across from him.

Dashing Charlie heard the click of the outlaw's rifle, and knew that it lay across the saddle ready to fire, while the man was half-turned around, holding with one hand the knife against his throat.

"I am glad I met you, Dick, for now we can search each bank well as we go down," said a voice which Dashing Charlie recognized as Kit Kirby's.

He heard them talking, the falls of their horses' hoofs as they went by, and a minute after the sigh of relief that broke from the lips of Black Horse Bill as they passed on without a suspicion of who was so near them.

"Now to my lair, Dashing Charlie," said the chief, and they continued on up the stream once more.

CHAPTER LXII.

STILL NO CLEW.

THERE was really distress felt at the fort, for the unknown fate of Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan.

They were both popular men, the chief of scouts being generally liked by officers, soldiers, the families of the officers and his own men, for he had a genial way about him always, and his splendid nerve commanded admiration from all.

That both Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan had fallen into the clutches of the Black Horse Bravos, not a soul doubted.

The question was as to what their fate had been.

With the remembrance of Black Horse Bill's past deeds, and his meeting with Lieutenant Wainwright and Racket Rube, and the result, there was little doubt but that he would be guilty of any crime.

He had refused a pardon and that was evidence enough that he intended to keep up his evil life.

How the outlaws had captured both Diamond Dan and his chief soon after was what puzzled every one.

How they had managed to hide their trail was another problem which could not be solved.

The return of Captain DeLong's command without finding a clew was what caused all to give up hope of ever seeing the scouts again.

Racket Rube had begun to improve rapidly, and talked of taking his coach out very soon again.

The general was glad of this, as no other driver would go through that part of the run without an escort of soldiers past Crows' Roost, and which had also to be sent to meet him upon his return.

At last the crisis in the case of Lieutenant Wainwright passed.

He awoke one morning from his long delirium, his fever had left him wholly and his wound was healing rapidly.

He was surprised when Captain DeLong told him how long he had been so ill.

"Four weeks," he repeated again and again to himself.

General Wesley went to see him the moment he heard of the great change in him, and the young officer said:

"General, that man is a fiend, I assure you."

"He refused the pardon you sent him, and I was glad to get the chance to capture him."

"We had it all our own way until we ran into his ambushed band, and then I got this wound."

"I felt the bullet tear its way into my breast, and I could do nothing to help myself or Racket Rube."

"I fell back upon the coach-top, yet was conscious and saw all."

"Oh, if you had seen that splendid fellow, Rubel!"

"He placed me as comfortably as he could, held me there with one leg, and such driving as he did I never believed possible."

"I saw him turn once and fire, and he killed his man."

"Then Dashing Charlie and two others rushed to the rescue, and I knew no more."

"I have been here four weeks, Captain DeLong says."

"Yes, and I have reported your brave acts to the Secretary of War, Wainwright, and Racket Rube is all that you say he is."

"He will take his coach again, he says, in a couple of weeks, in fact would do so sooner if I would allow it."

"Now you must build up as rapidly as you can, and Mrs. DeLong insists on being your caterer, so you must submit."

"Every one has been so good to me, general."

"It is worth while receiving the wound that I did, just to know one has really very dear friends."

"But the nurse told me that Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan have been captured by the Black Horse Bravos, sir."

"The nurse had no right to worry you with telling you of them."

"But it is true?"

"Oh, yes, they have mysteriously disappeared, but Captain DeLong goes to-morrow to the scene with three troops, to camp in the vicinity for a week in three different camps, and all the scouts under Kit Kirby go with him, so we hope to find some clew to the retreat of the Black Horse Bravos, and that will mean the release of the scouts, I hope."

"I trust so, sir; but have the Bravos been at work again upon the trails?"

"Not since you saw them; but you have talked all I will allow, so we will go."

That night Mrs. DeLong and Gabrielle Garland went with the captain and spent half an hour with the lieutenant, while they also paid a visit to Racket Rube, who was delighted with the kindness shown him.

The next morning Captain DeLong rode away from the fort at the head of three troops and with nine scouts ahead of the command.

One troop camped at Mountain Spring, another at the mouths of the three rivers and the third in the valley above the canyon, and the whole country was thoroughly searched.

But after a week's absence they returned and reported that not the slightest clew could be found to the retreat of the Black Horse Bravos or the missing men, Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE LASSO-THROWER.

ONE afternoon, the day after the departure of Captain DeLong and his three troops from the country operated in by the Black Horse Bravos, a horseman was riding slowly along a trail when he suddenly perceived some one approaching him.

He rode quickly into a thicket, and from thence reached an open space between two huge boulders.

There he waited, and that he intended to bring the coming horseman to a halt was shown by his preparations.

He loosened his weapons in his belt, then raised his lariat from his saddle-horn and held the coil ready to launch into the air.

"At last we are to meet."

"I have waited for weeks, hiding like a hunted beast from all others to get near this man."

"This is the third time that I have seen him, but never so near as this."

"Yes, this time we are to meet, though I will not kill him."

"Now to be ready, for I hear the fall of his horse's hoofs."

So said the horseman, and he braced himself for the work before him.

A moment more and the horseman was abreast of the opening between the huge rocks, and at once the lariat was let fly.

It was thrown as true in its aim as a bullet would have gone.

The noose settled over the shoulders of the horseman, and as the animal he rode made a lunge forward, the lariat came taut with a twang, the horse of the thrower bracing himself for the shock, and then came the drag which

brought the victim out of his saddle to the ground.

The jerk was a severe one, and the fall heavy, so that the fallen man was stunned.

Quickly his captor sprung from his saddle, and running to him at once, started back, while from his lips broke the words in a startled way:

"My God! what a resemblance.

"It is my very self!"

The resemblance between the two men was startling, indeed.

They were of the same size and build, and were dressed almost identically alike.

They both wore long hair, and their beard fell to their belts, while it was of the same hazel hue.

Nor was this all, for they each rode jet-black horses, splendid matches, in fact, and their bridles, saddles and equipments were of the Mexican pattern.

"I hope I have not killed him, though he lies as still as though he were dead," said the captor.

With this he tore open the black silk shirt the fallen man wore, and placed his hand upon his heart.

"No, it beats, and rapidly— Great God!"

The cry came with a burst from the captor's lips, and his eyes were riveted upon the bared breast of the fallen man.

There, pricked in with india-ink, just over the heart were two clasped hands, one of blue, the other red, and upon the back of each were initials.

Upon the red were the letters:

"R. G."

Upon the blue the letters were:

"P. P."

"Now I understand it all, yes, now I know him."

"Oh! but what has he not made me suffer, what bitterness has he not caused me and disgrace brought upon me.

"What a temptation to drive my knife into his heart now, send the point through the red hand that I put upon his breast years ago.

"How well I recall the day.

"We were little boys then, and dearer to each other than brothers, and he it was that proposed that I should prick in with india-ink our clasped hands, over his heart, showing that our friendship was never to end.

"He chose the red hand and I did the work, and there it has remained all these years, just thirteen.

"And over my heart he placed the same symbol of everlasting friendship.

"We loved each other then as though we were a boy and girl, and we so resembled each other that we were called the Two Dromios.

"Many a time have I taken a whipping for his acts, the teacher believing that he was punishing the guilty one.

"Ah me! how those days come back to me, now that I stand over the companion of my boyhood, he who, instead of remaining true to those clasped hands, that friendship which was to be everlasting, wrecked my entire life, and brought a cloud upon me that has no silver lining, a cloud that will ever darken my career, go where I may.

"It causes me to go about the world under an assumed name, to hide in shame from those who knew me in my boyhood, in my days of early manhood.

"My God! how these memories sweep over me now, and greatly am I tempted to be avenged, to strike him to the heart.

"No! no! it is not my nature to do a deed so cruel, so vile— Hal he is regaining consciousness!

"Will he know me, I wonder?"

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE FOES.

As the man who had captured his victim by throwing his lasso so skillfully over him, saw that there were signs of returning consciousness, he quickly unbuckled his belt of arms and hastily searched him for any other weapons that he might have, at the same time securing his feet in bonds that could not be easily shaken off.

As he did so he discovered that the cause of the man's being stunned was a blow he had received in falling, for a rock had cut the scalp to the bone.

"Ah! this is it, is it?"

"I hope he is not seriously injured.

"I wondered that the fall should so long keep him unconscious.

"He is coming round all right, I think."

As the captor uttered the words he stepped back a few paces, and folding his arms stood gazing upon the one who was his counterpart in appearance to such a wonderful extent.

The man shuddered once or twice, moved his limbs convulsively and then opening his eyes arose to a sitting posture, while his gaze became riveted upon the lasso-thrower.

His face flushed and then paled, and he rubbed his eyes as though to see if he was awake.

"Oh, yes, you are awake," said the other with a sneer.

"I know you," gasped the man.

"Who am I?"

"First tell me how you captured me?"

"I lassoed you, and in falling you were stunned."

"Yes, I was asleep in my saddle.

"But I know you."

"Who am I?"

"You are the man who warned the fort of danger, and thus enabled them to beat off the Indians."

"Yes."

"You warned the settlements also, and rendered the soldiers great service in their march in pursuit of the red-skins."

"Yes, and who was it that I was mistaken for, was nearly hanged on account of my resemblance to?"

"Me, of course."

"Why, I was startled when I saw you."

"I thought I was dreaming, or looking at myself—oh! I am wounded," and he put his hand up to the cut in his head.

"A mere gash in your scalp, which I will sew up and dress for you, though that was the blow that stunned you."

"I was struck there with a revolver?"

"No, your head struck that piece of rock there where you fell."

"But shall I tell you who you are?"

"Do you know?"

"Yes."

"Who am I?"

"The outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill."

"I am not."

"It is useless to lie to me, for I know you."

"I am not surprised, now that I see you, that I was taken for you, for we are strangely alike."

"Who are you?"

"I will tell you later on."

"Now, let me say to you that my resemblance to you also saved my life, for I got in among the Indians and was hailed as the 'Bad White Chief' their friend, Black Horse Bill."

"Those who did not know me, in the attack on the settlement, attacked me, and I defended myself, and released their chief, and afterward it was not held against me."

"Seeing that I was mistaken for you, I carried out the cheat, and so aided the soldiers, then went on to the Indian village with them in their stampede, and recovered my splendid horse there, which had been captured by them."

"They treated me well, as Black Horse Bill, and to get better acquainted with them and their country, I remained with them for some weeks."

"Then I came upon the search for you."

"I wanted to enter the army and I concluded I would gain favor by doing something to aid me in my intentions."

"That something I determined should be the capture of Black Horse Bill, yourself."

"I have been roaming about your scenes of outlawry, hoping to find you."

"Twice before have I seen you, but not under circumstances when I could make you my prisoner."

"This time I have been more successful, and now I can take you to the fort, where General Wesley will very quickly put an end to your guilty life."

The captor of Black Horse Bill spoke in a low, distinct and earnest tone.

He seemed determined that his prisoner should know the exact truth, and Black Horse Bill listened with the deepest attention.

He appeared fascinated in gazing at the man before him, but turned deadly pale when his counterpart spoke of taking him to the fort, where he would be hanged.

"And how have I wronged you that you should wish to see me hanged?" at last asked Black Horse Bill, his voice losing its tone of defiance.

It was the stranger's time now to turn pale, and his face became whiter than that of the man he had threatened with hanging a moment before.

"How have you wronged me?"

He asked the question in a low, earnest tone, indicative of deepest feeling.

"Yes; I have done you no personal wrong or harm, have I?"

"Yes," came the words, in thunder tones.

"Yes, for you bear upon your breast, over your heart, a symbol of clasped hands, one red, the other blue, and over my heart is the same symbol."

"Do you ask now how you have wronged me, Raleigh Garnett?"

"My God!" gasped Black Horse Bill, and he bent his head before the look turned upon him by his captor.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE COMPROMISE.

BLACK HORSE BILL was deeply moved by all that had passed, and especially when he recognized the one before him as his boyhood companion, to whom he had once vowed eternal fealty.

"Yes, I know you now, and it is strange that I did not recognize you before," at last said the

outlaw, the silence becoming painful as he sat there beneath the withering gaze of the man whom he had wronged.

"You recognize me, and yet you ask how you have wronged me?"

"Shall I tell you, Raleigh Garnett?"

The outlaw was silent.

"Shall I tell you that away back in my boyhood, about thirteen years ago, I took whippings from the teacher for your acts, as we were so alike, and, dressing alike, it was not known who was guilty?"

"Shall I tell you that you were like a snake then, and divided my boyhood life from a little girl whom I called sweetheart?"

"I did not know it then, did not suspect, but found it out only when I found you out."

"Shall I tell you that when we entered the academy together I was expelled for act of yours?"

"And again, when we were both cadets at West Point together I was dismissed for committing a theft, for it was either you or I, the cadets who saw the theft said, and when accused, I was silent."

"Why did I not denounce you?"

"You know but too well, and knew it then, that I sacrificed myself because I loved your sister, because I hoped to make her my wife some day."

"I left the Point, a disgraced cadet, and I expected you at least to clear me with your sister, to confess your guilt to her."

"But you did not, and I went my way through the world with the brand of a thief upon my brow."

"All my hopes, my ambition and my love were crushed by that fell blow."

"I was desperate, and sprung into the river to rescue a negro who fell overboard."

"I hoped that I would lose my life in the attempt."

"But vain the hope."

"I went to a gambling saloon that night in New York and I won a large sum of money."

"With it I went to Mexico, and from there I sailed for Europe, for Egypt, for India, and the spirit of unrest upon me, I returned to the United States and went again to Mexico."

"There I dwelt until six months ago, when I wandered alone and on horseback into New Mexico, Colorado and then here."

"I found by accident a retreat in the range to the south from here, and I passed my days in roaming about, a veritable Mounted Tramp."

"Then it fell my way to render good service to General Wesley and others, to serve Dashing Charlie, and the settlers, and by all I was taken for you, for Black Horse Bill, the outlaw chief, for by a strange coincidence I dressed like you and rode a black horse and Mexican rig, while we are so strangely alike in appearance I can well pardon those who supposed that I was you."

"Then I determined, as I said, to hunt you down, little dreaming that I would find in Black Horse Bill my treacherous boyhood companion, Raleigh Garnett."

"I recall now that you failed to pass at West Point and were dropped from the roll."

"I recall that I saw an account of where you had shot a man over a game of cards, but I did not know that you had fled to the West and become as bad as you are."

"But now I know you as you are, and you are my prisoner, at my mercy, and you have wrecked my whole life, for before the world I am disgraced."

"You would not kill me when I am helpless, at your mercy, Prevost?" cried Black Horse Bill in alarm.

"No, not if you obey my bidding, for I will spare you for the sake of the maiden I loved so well, your sister."

"Thank God!"

"You will do as I say?"

"Yes, gladly."

"Well, I desire to at least rid you of the means to do evil."

"I desire to capture your band, and to do so I shall impersonate you."

"I shall ride your horse, and you are to direct me how to reach your retreat."

"I will show you."

"No, I go alone, and I shall leave you securely bound, beyond all chance of escape."

"If aught happens to me you will lie there and starve to death, or be devoured by wolves."

"I shall go as Black Horse Bill, and I shall arrange a plan to get your band into my power."

"Then I shall come and set you free."

"I will take your pledge to at once leave this border and forever, and if ever you break that pledge never will I show you one atom of mercy."

"Do you hear?"

"I do; but you can never find my secret retreat without my aid."

"I can and will; but beware not to direct me wrong."

"How many men have you?"

"There are just eight at the retreat."

"I must know the name of each and a description of them by name, for there shall be no mistake, if you expect to live."

"I will do all in my power to aid you."
 "And you accept my terms in return for your life?"
 "I do."
 "Swear it!"
 "I swear it."
 "Now I will take you to my retreat," and the man whom the reader now knows as Prevost Preston, the disgraced cadet, began preparations for leaving the spot where they then were.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE BLACK HORSE GUIDE.

AWAY up in a crevice of rocks in the mountains sheltered by a thick growth of pines was a charming spot for an encampment.

A spring trickled out of a rock and formed a crystal pool at its base, a carpet of velvety grass was upon the ground all about, and among the rocks was a snug shelter from wind and rain.

It was to this spot that the Mounted Tramp had taken the outlaw prisoner.

He had dressed his wounded head most skillfully, had spread him a blanket, and then, with an extra lariat which he carried, had most securely bound him to a scrub pine, but placed food and a canteen at hand so that he could raise it to his lips with his bound hands and also lie down and get rest.

His own horse he had staked out near, so that he could reach the pool for water and also have grass enough within reach to last him several days.

"Now, Black Horse Bill, if you can free yourself from those bonds you are welcome to do so."

"My horse is all right and you have food and water enough to last you three days, so you will not starve."

"Now, I shall follow your directions and go to your retreat, but beware if you have told me wrong."

With this the Mounted Tramp rode away.

He was mounted upon the outlaw's horse and had his equipments, taking also his sombrero and the scarf he wore about his neck in place of his own, for he knew that he was going upon a desperately dangerous mission.

He directed his way down into the valley and came out at the Three Rivers.

There he turned into the right-hand stream, followed it up past the fallen tree and into the deeper and faster flowing waters of the canyon.

He gave the horse the rein, and was surprised when he made directly for the wall of the canyon on the right.

A large piece of rock had fallen off there, and the waters eddied furiously about it, forming what looked like a dangerous whirlpool, and which had been naturally avoided by the scouts and soldiers in passing.

But the outlaw's horse was given free rein by his rider, and going in behind the huge rock passed into a cavern which was then visible.

"You are right, old fellow, and I do not wonder the place was never found," said the Mounted Tramp.

Still allowing the horse his rein, he passed on into the cavern which was lighted some distance back from the river end, and beyond daylight also appeared from that point.

The horse went on unfailingly until he came out upon a path, or trail which looked down into a canyon, large, fertile and well timbered.

The Mounted Tramp made his horse fast, and with his glass began to reconnoiter the situation.

He saw several huts of logs, a score of black horses feeding near, and knew that he had found the camp of the Black Horse Bravos.

Men too were visible here and there, and as it was now getting twilight he mounted his horse and rode on down the trail.

He rode slowly, for he wished to put himself to the test in the gathering darkness.

The outlaw's horse was his guide and went straight up to the door of one of the cabins and halted, while a man came up and said:

"Shall I stake him out, chief?"

"Yes."

"Any news, sir?"

"Yes; soldiers are about, and the men must keep close."

"We'll do it, sir."

"Where are the prisoners?" asked the Mounted Tramp, for the outlaw chief had confessed that he had two and who they were.

"All safe, sir."

"Send Dashing Charlie to me."

"Yes, chief."

The man went to a cabin near, and returned accompanied by Dashing Charlie, whose hands and feet were in irons.

"Now stake my horse out."

The man departed, and, after glancing into the cabin the Mounted Tramp said:

"Who do you take me to be, Dashing Charlie?"

"The devil himself," was the reply of the scout.

"You suppose me to be Black Horse Bill, but

I am not, for he is my prisoner up in the mountains, and I am playing a bold game for your rescue and the capture of this band.

"I am the Mounted Tramp, and, having seen Black Horse Bill, I do not wonder that you mistook me for him—do not say a word, for I must do the talking now."

"You and Diamond Dan are in the same cabin, but who has the keys of your irons?"

"Ben, the outlaw."

"All right."

"I'll call for him and send you back, and you tell Diamond Dan that I intend to free you both."

"There are two wounded outlaws here?"

"Yes."

"And six others?"

"Yes—here comes Ben, now."

As Dashing Charlie spoke, the outlaw approached and asked:

"Have supper now, chief?"

"No, for I want you to take Paulding and Lucas with you, and go on a scout down as far as the Three Rivers and see if there are any soldiers encamped there, but return to-night and report."

"Yes, chief."

"Give me the keys of the irons of the prisoners, for if there are soldiers there we may have to leave here, and I wish to chain the prisoners upon the horses."

Ben the outlaw handed over the keys, and when the Mounted Tramp saw him and his two comrades ride away he sent for three more of the men to catch the horses and have them ready for a move.

The men obeyed and started upon their work when the Mounted Tramp said:

"Now, Dashing Charlie, I shall set you free."

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE MOUNTED TRAMP'S STRATEGY.

DASHING CHARLIE was utterly astounded at the turn affairs had taken.

He could not but still believe that the man before him was Black Horse Bill, playing some deep game he could not fathom.

"Now go and set Diamond Dan free, and when those three men come back I will send one of them to your cabin on some errand, and you are to make him a prisoner."

"I will then capture the other two, and when all are safely bound we will look after the two wounded men."

"Next we will capture the three men now off on a pretended reconnaissance, when they return, and the band of Black Horse Bravos will be in our power."

"Sure; but have you been to the fort, sir?"

"No, but I shall go there to-morrow with you, Diamond Dan and our prisoners."

"If you are not Black Horse Bill, where is he?"

"At my camp, bound and awaiting my return."

"His horse was my guide here."

"Well, sir, I'll do as you tell me, but I don't understand it all," and Dashing Charlie went back to the cabin to tell Diamond Dan what had happened.

The horses were caught in an hour's time, and as one of the men came up to report he was sent to the cabin where the prisoners were.

The Mounted Tramp then called the other two men by name, for Dashing Charlie had told him who they were, and as they came up to the cabin they were suddenly covered with a revolver in each hand of the Mounted Tramp, who said:

"Men, there is some work going on here which I shall explain soon."

"Up with your hands, quick!"

"No, chief, I hain't done nothing wrong, and I hain't goin' ter—"

The speaker had dropped his hand upon his revolver, but the Mounted Tramp was too quick for him and pulled trigger, and he dropped dead at the feet of his slayer.

Up over his head went the hands of the other man, just as Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan rushed in.

"Bind that man, Dashing Charlie."

"I had to kill the other one there."

"Pity! he ought to have been hanged," and Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan had the amazed and frightened outlaw bound in an instant.

"We got our man, too, sir, but had to knock him down," Dashing Charlie said.

"All right, we will now capture the two wounded men."

"They are not so very bad off, sir, and may show fight."

"Let them," was the determined reply, as the Mounted Tramp asked Dashing Charlie to lead the way to their cabin.

They were cowed at once upon seeing the two prisoners free, and were quickly bound.

Then the four prisoners were placed in one cabin, the dead outlaw was buried, and the Mounted Tramp and the two scouts sat down to await the return of the three outlaws who had been sent away to the Three Rivers.

They rode up to the chief's cabin soon after midnight, and were at once covered by the Mounted Tramp and two scouts and ordered to surrender.

One of them wheeled to dash away, but dropped from his horse from a shot from Dashing Charlie, while a second showed fight and fell under the fire of Diamond Dan, for the Mounted Tramp had his man covered and captured him.

"Now we will bury these two bodies and then get some rest before dawn, for our prisoners are safe," said the Mounted Tramp.

It was an hour after breakfast the following morning, when the Mounted Tramp led the way out of the secret canyon.

Behind him followed the five prisoners, among them the two wounded men, but who were able to ride.

Then came Dashing Charlie leading the pack-horses of the outlaws, loaded with the plunder found in the camp, and Diamond Dan brought up the rear with a dozen fine black animals.

The party went into camp at noon, and the Mounted Tramp said:

"Dashing Charlie, I wish to tell you and Diamond Dan that I am going now to let my prisoner free, for I do so to carry out my terms of the compact with him, in case I found his retreat, rescued you and captured his band."

"I will return within a couple of hours, or as soon after as possible, and then go on with you to the fort."

Mounting his horse the Mounted Tramp rode away and took the trail to the camp in the mountain top.

He found his prisoner just as he had left him the day before and said:

"You did not deceive me, Black Horse Bill, and I have come back to keep my word to you."

"Here is your horse, and your weapons are not loaded, the ammunition being in this bag, and food also for several days."

"You ought to be hanged, but for the sake of the past I spare you."

"See! I set you free now, so go your way, and make for a stage station where you are not known."

"If ever you appear again upon this border, I shall show you no mercy, for here shall I remain, as I intend to enlist in the army."

"Your men are my prisoners, those who did not resist, and your plunder and horses are in my possession."

"Now go!"

Black Horse Bill would have spoken but the Mounted Tramp waved him away, and leaping into his saddle he rode off in silence.

With a deep sigh the Mounted Tramp rode down the mountain trail to rejoin the scouts and their prisoners in the camp in the valley.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

SEATED upon the headquarters piazza at the fort the day following the capture of the retreat of the Black Horse Bravos, were the general, Captain and Mrs. DeLong, Gabrielle Garland and Lieutenant Calvin Wainwright, the latter looking pale, but gaining his strength rapidly.

There was quite a commotion when the sentinel on the lookout reported a cavalcade coming.

No troops were expected and it was not known what it could be.

Then came the cry that it was Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan bringing in Black Horse Bill and his band as prisoners, with the outlaws' horses and plunder.

All was excitement now, and as they rode up to the headquarters every eye was upon the supposed outlaw chief, in spite of the greeting bestowed upon the two scouts.

"General Wesley, this is Mr. Rockwell, the Mounted Tramp, the very image of Black Horse Bill, but not that outlaw by any means, for he has captured the band of Bravos and rescued Diamond Dan and myself, while he has come to the fort to enlist in the army, if you will accept him as a soldier."

So said Dashing Charlie, and it is needless to say that the Mounted Tramp received a most cordial welcome, and when all the circumstances of his capture of the outlaws were known, he was at once made a hero of.

Of his past he made nothing known, and he was still a mystery at the fort.

But he proved to be a splendid soldier, and rose through his own brave acts in time to an officer's commission, presented to him "for distinguished services rendered."

Diamond Dan and Dashing Charlie still live, the former upon the border, the latter in the East, and Racket Rube drives a coach in the Far West to this day, and though he has no longer a dangerous trail to travel, he never tires of telling of the days when he carried his life in his hand upon every run, and how the Black Horse Bravos were run to earth by the Mounted Tramp, aided by Dashing Charlie and his Deadshots.

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